Island of Miracles

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8438773.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Major Character Death
Category: F/F, F/M, Gen, M/M
Fandom: Dangan Ronpa, Super Dangan Ronpa 2, Dangan Ronpa: Another Episode, Dangan Ronpa 3: The End of 希望ヶ峰学園 | The End of Kibougamine Gakuen | End of Hope's Peak High School, Dangan Ronpa - All Media Types

Relationship: Hinata Hajime/Komaeda Naigito, Hinata Hajime/Nanami Chiaki, Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko/Pekoyama Peko, Sonia Nevermind/Tanaka Gundam, Nidai Nekomaru/Owari Akane, Koizumi Mahiru & Saionji Hiyoko, Mostly Komahina, But the others will get some time too


Additional Tags: Friendship, Love, Death, Relationship(s), Violence, Drama, Psychological Trauma, Post-Canon, Canon Compliant, Angst, Character Development, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, Developing Relationship, Canon-Typical Violence, Island Mode (Dangan Ronpa), Islands, Ocean, Falling In Love, Love Confessions, Established Relationship, Psychological Drama, Angst and Feels, Character Study, Character Analysis, Personal Growth, Murder, Mystery, Murder Mystery, Trials

Stats: Published: 2016-11-01 Updated: 2019-01-02 Chapters: 30/? Words: 149155

Island of Miracles

by Semiya

Summary

Hajime Hinata and his friends have chosen to create their own future in the real world. As Makoto Naegi, Kyoko Kirigiri, and Byakuya Togami leave them on Jabberwock Island, they must begin the task of rebuilding their lives and saving their comrades. They've chosen a difficult path for themselves, a path filled with hope. And despair.

A despair that only grows and grows as the former Remnants of Despaie realize that their enemies come from both without and within. They destroyed the world once. They saved the world once. But can they save each other?

Chap 1-16 are set post SDR2 and pre-Hope Arc.
Chap 17-?? are set post Hope Arc.
Going back and reading this again, I'm sorry this chapter sucks so badly. I promise it gets better. :-)

The boat carrying the three members of the Future Foundation, Makoto Naegi, Kyoko Kirigiri, and the real Byakuya Togami, vanished against the horizon. Hajime stood there for several minutes even after he couldn’t see the boat anymore. Even Izuru, the ultimate at everything, shouldn’t be able to see that far. The sea breeze ruffled through his hair. His mercifully short hair. Brown, too. Spiky as all hell, but...that was the way he liked it. Not long and black and -

The sun flirted with the seawater. It was easy to imagine the glistening light as a blush…like how Chiaki had when…no. Hajime shook his head. Those weren’t healthy thoughts. The sky was blue. The sea was blue. And Chiaki was gone. She had sacrificed everything to save them. Not just her life - her entire existence. At the very least, he owed it to her to cherish her memory. Not wanting to forget her had been his driving motivation to escape Enoshima’s trap. Now that he'd made it - that everyone had made it - he would honor that promise. Not just that. He would find a way to revive their sleeping friends too. That's what she would have wanted.

“Yo! Hajimmy!” There was only one person who would butcher his name that way.

“Hello, Akane,” he said. She was looking well. Or at least better than he’d hoped. After what Enoshima had said, Hajime had expected her to be skin and bones. In serious danger of starving to death. And while she didn’t look as healthy as she had in the simulation, she didn’t seem to be in danger of collapsing in the next ten minutes. Seeing her in the flesh still felt strange though. She looked a lot like her avatar. Most of them did.

“Hajime? Are you listening?”

“Huh?” He blinked. “Sorry, Akane. What were you saying?”

“Food!” She pointed toward the hotel. “Everyone’s ready to eat, and you’re holdin’ us up. Besides, they want to talk about what to do next or something like that. I don’t really get it.”

Hajime forced himself to smile, though he couldn’t tell whether it was for her sake or his. “I get it. I’m coming.” Before he could suggest they travel together, she ran off down the beach, yelling like, well, Akane. Or maybe it was a bit more like Nekomaru. Hajime hoped he’d wake up soon. He hoped everyone would. Naegi seemed to have faith in him, and that sentiment comforted Hajime more than he could express. Taking a deep breath, he headed to the restaurant.

The resemblance between the simulated hotel and the real one stunned Hajime. Alter Ego had told him that the virtual world was Mostly Jabberwock Island, but still, seeing the real one be this functional and well-kept made Hajime wonder if he wasn’t still in a simulation, like a dream-within-a-dream type of thing.

He made his way past the cottages and the pool. Even now, there wasn’t a single leaf in the pool. Well, there weren’t any trees around the pool either, so he guessed it wasn’t that strange. It was
strange that the cottages were really there. They weren’t labelled of course, so maybe that had always been part of the attraction? Or had the Future Foundation built them when it was repurposing the island? He supposed it didn’t really matter.

Walking into the restaurant, Hajime was struck by its emptiness. Just a short time ago, everyone had been eating and laughing and having fun together. Chiaki. Mikan. Togami. Even Nagito. And now all of them were—

“You.” Fuyuhiko held up a hand in what could almost be called a wave. Despite the two years lost to him in the simulation, he hadn’t changed much either. Unlike Hiyoko, he hadn’t grown any taller. His pinstripe suit still fit him perfectly. And Hajime had already grown used to seeing eyepatch in the simulation. Even so, he tried not to stare at it too much. He had a sneaking suspicion that the Ultimate Yakuza had already dug out Junko’s eye rather than leave it in. At the very least, he could have waited for Mikan to wake up. She was the Ultimate Nurse, so she was best equipped to handle that kind of thing. When she woke up, that was.

“Are you troubled, Hajime?” Sonia approached him, concern written over her graceful features. “You look worried.”

“No, I’m just….” Hajime stopped. “Yeah. I was thinking about the others.”

“That’s one of things we’re here to discuss,” Fuyuhiko said.

“We can talk while we eat, right?” Akane had started eating anyway. Did she ever get full? Well, he supposed it made sense. She was catching up on lost time, in a way. Her plate was piled with enough food to amaze even Hanamura. “So let’s eat!”

“We have to be careful, you know?” Kazuichi lingered near the exit. The 7th Island flag over his head flopped around in the breeze. “Resources are limited now. We’re dependent on the Future Foundation’s shipments, aren’t we?”

“I agree,” Hajime added. “We have to ration the supplies we do have…in case the others wake up as well.”

“Do we even know if that will happen?” Sonia moved so that a table stood between her and Kazuichi. “Naegi-kun and the others said it was impossible.”

“Almost impossible,” Fuyuhiko growled. “But it’ll happen. It’ll definitely fucking happen. Because I-I need to see Peko again.” A single tear spilled down from his eye.

“Fuyuhiko.” Hajime didn’t know what to say.

“But, like, wouldn’t it be better if some of them didn’t wake up?” Kazuichi scratched the back of his neck. “I mean, if Komaeda-kun stayed asleep, we’d have more food, and we wouldn’t have to deal with him. It’s a win-win.”

“You’re right,” Fuyuhiko nodded. “It’d be better for all of us if that bastard never woke up.”

“That is wrong!” Sonia held out her hand commandingly. “He is still our classmate. Our friend. We should not wish such a fate upon him.”

“Miss Sonia’s right,” Kazuichi said. Hajime barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Would it be better if Nagito stayed comatose? He didn’t know. It would be easy to say, yes. Let him stay that way. But Hajime couldn’t bring himself to do that.
“So when will they wake up?” Akane sprayed bits of food everywhere. “I wanna fight coach Nekomaru!”

“Enough!” Fuyuhiko slammed his fist on the table. The plates rattled against the wood. Akame glowered, but Fuyuhiko steamrolled on before she could object. “Cut the bullshit! We need…we need to talk about, you know, the big thing. Being Ultimate Despair.” His outburst settled over everyone like snow. It slipped through Hajime’s skin and froze his blood. Every beat of his heart struggled to push through a glacier.

And then it happened. The thought crept out from the caverns in his mind, knocked against his consciousness like a tree branch on a window. It held a post-mortem stiffness, and it felt so cold that the ice from earlier could have been a summer rain.

How boring.

Number of Students: 5
As Hajime attempts to reassure Sonia, Kazuichi, Fuyuhiko, and Akane, the first of their comatose friends begin to awaken.

How boring.

Two words. Two words that filled Hajime’s consciousness and threatened to drown it completely. A web of images filled his mind. Junko, under his foot, promising that despair would eliminate his boredom. Nagito, eyes wide, reaching for him as if he were a sunbeam. Yukizome-sensei, struggling as she slipped into despair. And Chiaki, laying in a bath of her own blood. Chiaki… Chiaki….

“Hajime!”

“Huh?” He glanced up. “Sorry. What?”

“I knew it.” Kazuichi was nearly outside the restaurant. Hajime had no idea how to describe his expression. Terrified felt like an understatement. “I knew it,” he repeated. “H-he’s still Izuru Kamukura!”

“What are you talking about?” A memory of Kazuichi accusing him of being the traitor back in Strawberry House flashed through his mind. Hajime pushed it aside. “I’m Hajime! Just because I remember everything, that doesn’t mean – it doesn’t mean I’m Izuru! I’m Hajime!”

“But your eyes,” Sonia murmured.

Akane blinked. “Eyes? What eyes?”

Fuyuhiko ignored her. “Hajime, your eyes turned red.”

Turned red? Hajime reached for his face. Then he felt stupid. It’s not like he could feel his own eyes, and even if he could, that wouldn’t tell him their color. But still. “Red?”

“Well,” Sonia said, “it seems they are back to normal now.”

“Maybe.” Kazuichi was not convinced. “Izuru’s a super-genius, right? He could be tricking us all right now.”

“That’s wrong!” Hajime wanted to shout. Or punch Kazuichi right in his stupid face. As if accusing him of being the traitor back in Strawberry House hadn’t been enough, now he wanted to do it all over again. “I told you already. I’m Hajime!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Fuyuhiko interjected. “Hajime, Izuru, whatever. We’re all Ultimate Despair, remember?” Unconsciously, he lifted a hand to his eyepatch. “We all did some really fucked up shit. I mean, Peko and I, we…” He fell silent.

Hajime braced himself, but there wasn’t a wave of darkness this time. No chill. Nothing. No, that
wasn’t right. He felt a fistful of fire blazing in his chest. It was the same way he’d felt when confronting Junko. Yes. There wasn’t room for hesitation. There wasn’t even a need for it. It’s not that there was only one path forward. Because they would make their own.

“Everyone. Listen to me.” He waited until they all looked at him. Even Akane stopped eating, which seemed like the best endorsement he could get. “It’s true that we’ve all done horrible things. It’s like Naegi-kun said. We walked the wrong path once. And we hurt a lot of people. A lot of people. I don’t know if we can ever atone for that. Maybe we can’t.”

“It’s not our fault!” Kazuichi interjected. “Junko brainwashed us!”

“Even so.” Hajime continued. “We all did things we can never take back. We need to accept that. All of us. If we don’t, we’ll never move forward. We’ll be stuck in a pool of our own regrets. That won’t accomplish anything. Nothing. Except giving us all more despair. And I think we’ve caused enough of that already. Did you forget? We’ve already chosen the future. Our future should have more possibilities than that. We can’t forget our despair. But we also need to have hope. Even if we can’t be redeemed, we need to have hope. Because we’ve already chosen, haven’t we? We’ve already chosen the future that we want. So all we need to do now is make it real.”

The silence which enveloped them this time differed from the earlier one. It was calming, gently rocking them like water. Hajime had faith in his friends. They’d come around. They always had before, and they would again.

Applause rang out from the staircase. Everyone turned to see Byakuya Togami, or rather, the Ultimate Imposter standing there. A smile bordering on a smirk rested on his face. “Well said, Hinata-kun. That was a wonderful speech.”

“Togami-kun!” Hajime and the others ran over to him. “You’re awake!”

“Indeed.” Togami seemed unsure how to respond. That must have been a rare occurrence for him. “It seems a lot has happened since…since I….” His mouth twitched like an inset. Layers of fat rippled across his cheeks. “I don’t understand. What is this?” His eyes danced over everyone in the room before landing on Hajime. “What happened?”

“Wait for meeeeee!” Cried another voice before Hajime could speak. Something about that fake gentility mixed with a hint of shrillness sounded familiar. Hajime’s suspicions were confirmed a few seconds later, when Hanamura wobbled his way up the stairs.

“Teruteru!” Sonia exclaimed. “It is good to see you are awake.”

“If he’s up,” Fuyuhiko, “then maybe the others are too. Maybe Peko—”

“I’m always up,” Hanamura began, but Fuyuhiko was already racing downstairs toward the lobby. Hajime sprinted after him. It was highly unlikely that the others would be awake. Naegi had said it would be nearly impossible. But then, within an hour, two people had already recovered. So maybe it was possible. Maybe their future really was full of miracles.

But the pods were still. They hummed faintly, like old vending machines, but none of their occupants had so much as twitched. Hajime had expected that. He’d expected it, but still. “Dammit!” He punched the wall. Something cracked in his hand. When he lifted it to look, a small streak of blood remained on the wall. “Dammit!”

Someone touched his shoulder. Sonia. “Please come back upstairs, Hajime. We need to tell the others what has happened.” She attempted a smile, but her hand on his shoulder wouldn’t stop
trembling. Hajime nodded. That’s right. He was the leader now. Not Chiaki. Not Togami. Not Naegi. After all he’d done to save everyone, he couldn’t afford to break down like this. Especially not in front of everyone. Confidence. He needed to show the kind of confidence he’d always wanted. The kind he wasn’t sure he had. The others believed in him. Even Nagito, right before they’d seen Fuyuhiko in the hospital, had admired that confidence and called him strong. But how much of that was really his? How much was Izuru’s?

Fuyuhiko knelt by Peko’s pod. Hajime couldn’t see his face, but his shoulders shook, and his breathing sounded off. It was better to leave him alone for now. Trying to do anything for him now would antagonize him. He wanted to help, but sometimes the best way to do that was to give people their space. At least, Hajime hoped so. They could fill him in later if they came to any decisions.

Hajime straightened up and smiled at Sonia. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Number of Students: 7
Chapter Summary

Hajime and the Ultimate Imposter have a heart-to-heart.

The next day, Hajime explored the island. It wasn’t all that different from the simulation. The ranch still stood there, though whatever animals had once lived in it, if any, had long died. Much of the wood surrounding it had rotted away, and the letters on the sign were too weathered to read. The airport sat in a similar position. There weren’t any planes there, not that it mattered, since Hajime didn’t know how to fly one. Maybe Izuru did. There had to be an Ultimate Pilot talent, right?

The supermarket, Rocketpunch Market, now read as Ocepu Mkt, was in slightly better shape. The canned goods and bottled water looked safe, though Hajime made a mental note to verify that with Hanamura. Most of the fruits and meats had spoiled. If he stopped to listen, he could hear the faint squelching of maggots. He didn’t stop to listen. Near the back of the market, he found three freezers which were still running. He’d heard from Kirigiri that the Future Foundation had started making arrangements for Jabberwock Island to serve as a long-term shelter as a kind of nuclear option. Maybe that was why the hotel and market still had power.

There was evidence to support that theory. The guidebook he and Sonia read back in the simulation said that there weren’t any bridges connecting the islands, but he’d seen a treacherous-looking one leading to the central island.

He headed there now. The bridge swayed every time he took a step and even sometimes when he didn’t. Being dumped in the ocean wouldn’t be that bad. After all, he was the Ultimate Swimmer now too, right? Even so, he heaved a deep sigh of relief when his sneakers touched solid ground again. After catching his breath, he began searching the central island.

There was another, equally shoddy bridge leading to the second island. It seemed to Hajime that if the Future Foundation was going to take the time to connect all the islands, they might as well do it properly. Evidently they had disagreed. But then, that was it. There weren’t any other bridges. Either they’d fallen apart and crumbled into the sea, or else they’d never been there in the first place. Thinking about which had been the case was an exercise in futility.

Hajime stopped. That last thought—Izuru? It couldn’t be. He would know if Izuru thought something, right? He’d be able to tell. Surely.

Only that was a lie. He couldn't really be sure. That was the scary thing. He had no way of knowing which thoughts were even his. To live like that - that would be....

“Hinata-kun!” Hearing his own name rescued him. He looked up to see Togami approaching him from Jabberwock Park. Even though he hadn’t known Togami for long, seeing him like this still comforted Hajime. Togami was living proof that the future they’d chosen wasn’t hopeless. Their other friends could wake up, too. No, they would. They definitely would. And it wasn't just that. Togami had tried to save everyone in the simulation. He'd been their first leader, bringing everyone together and even arranging a party to try and prevent a murder. And in the end, he'd sacrificed himself to save Nagito. Nagito, of all people. Nagito, who'd been planning to murder someone to
create his demented idea of hope. But that was the kind of person this Togami was. He may have imitated the appearance of the Byakuya Togami who'd appeared during the final trial against Alter Ego Junko, but that Togami had been a narcissistic prick. This Togami was different.

“Hey.” Hajime sifted through his words. “Can I ask you something?”

Behind his glasses, Togami closed his eyes. “I shall permit it. Speak.”

He retained that smug attitude. It was almost scary how well they matched. He really was the Ultimate Imposter. The real Togami might not have been too happy with that. Hajime made an effort to frame his question gently. “What should we call you now?”

Well, that wasn’t gentle at all.

Togami sighed. “Right before we became...before we met Junko, I revealed myself to your classmates. I forgot that you weren’t there.” He ran a meaty hand through his hair. “I’m nameless. I’ve been many people in many places.” Hajime couldn’t help noting that lack of specifics in this explanation. “I won’t even be able to keep this form for much longer.” The way he said that reminded Hajime of Gundham. But surely the Ultimate Imposter wouldn’t pose as Gundham. He’d wake up soon. Hajime and the others would make sure of it.

“You know,” Hajime said, “I think it’s okay if you just be yourself. When we first got here, we thought we were all strangers. But now we know better. We’ve been through so much together. We’re friends. We’re all friends who support one another.”

Saying that made him wince. Not just for how lame it sounded, though that didn’t help. Remembering how lame it sounded reminded him of Nagito. Back before the first trial. Before Nagito had betrayed him.

But Togami nodded. “Friends, huh? What an interesting statement, Hinata-kun. All of us? Teruteru killed me, you know.”

“That’s—” Hajime’s mind blanked. It’s not that there were no words. Rather, there were, but none of them felt right. He couldn’t think of a way to connect them that would help Togami. And Fuyuhiko had once called him the Ultimate Counselor. Some Counselor he was!

Then Togami chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, Hajime. May I call you Hajime?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“You’re right, Hajime. We’re all living here. For real this time. We need to trust and cooperate with everyone else here. As the others wake up and face their killers, that may prove challenging. But I think you can help everyone through that.” The look in his face no longer resembled Byakuya Togami, the Ultimate Affluent Progeny. “You’ve become a fine leader, Hajime. I truly believe you can guide everyone through this.”

“T-Togami-kun.” Hajime felt heat rising in his face. The world spun. For a second, he saw the great statue symbolizing Jabberwock Island glisten as it reflected sunlight. Only this time, there weren’t any giant robots anywhere. The arcade machine was gone too. He might have used it to play games with Chiaki, just like they had before. Before all this happened. Before Izuru Kamukura and Ultimate Despair and everything else.

Hajime curled his fingers into a fist. This wasn’t good. Dwelling on the past like this wasn’t healthy. “Togami-kun, thank you.”
If the Ultimate Imposter sensed Hajime’s train of thought, he didn’t show it. “For now, call me Twogami.”

“Twogami?”

“Yes.” He did not elaborate.

Hajime nodded slowly. “Okay then. Let’s report our findings to the others.”

“Hajime!” The shout rang across the water. Kazuichi came charging toward them. “Hajime, hurry! You need to come to the hotel!”

“What is it, Kazuichi? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he shouted, even though he no longer needed to. “It’s Mahiru. Mahiru’s awake!”

Number of Students: 8
When the Photographer Can't Smile

Chapter Summary

Mahiru and Fuyuhiko have a heart-to-heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With Mahiru’s recovery, Fuyuhiko became fully convinced that Peko would be next. He brought a chair into the hotel lobby, seated himself next to her pod, and refused to budge. The sun fell and rose again, and still he sat there, waiting, possibly even praying, though Hajime couldn’t be certain. Fuyuhiko’s will was iron. He ignored Sonia and Hajime when they tried to coax him out or get him to have a drink of water.

That afternoon, Hajime convened everyone in the restaurant.

“So I’m worried,” he concluded, feeling lame for finishing so weakly. “I don’t think he’s eaten anything.” He hadn’t even used the toilet for all Hajime knew.

“Not eatin’?” Akane looked up from her fourth bowl of the egg and omochi Hanamura had prepared for breakfast. “Impossible!”

“It’s like Strawberry House all over again,” Kazuichi groaned. “Only he’s doing it to himself. That’s crazy, you know?”

“It is true that Peko would not want to see him like this,” Sonia added. “However, I do not know what to tell him. I am terribly sorry. As a princess, I should at least be able to comfort him.”

“It’s not your fault,” Kazuichi said.

Hajime ignored this. “I have the same problem.” Nagito and even Fuyuhiko himself thought he was good at this sort of thing. The Ultimate Serenity, the Ultimate Counselor. Now he was both, but he was also neither. Maybe that fact was what made this so difficult to handle.

“I’ll do it,” Mahiru’s voice dominated the restaurant. Her camera swung gently against her chest as she stood.

“Do it?” Hanamura sidled closer to her. “Do…what exactly?”

“Are you sure?” Hajime asked, ignoring Hanamura as well.

Mahiru locked eyes with him. “Yes.” When Hajime nodded, she turned back to Hanamura. “Why don’t you be useful and bring me a plate of something Fuyuhiko likes.” A statement. An order, actually.

“Something?” Hanamura leaned in. He evidently didn’t mind being ordered around. Knowing him, he may have even found it arousing. Ugh. Hajime pushed that thought away as Hanamura continued. “What sort of something? Something long? Round? Moist?”
“Fried dough cookies,” Hajime said, remembering a conversation he and Fuyuhiko had once had. Mahiru mouthed her thanks. Hanamura beamed. “Coming right up!” He exited the restaurant.

“Ah! Wait!” Akane yelled after the chef. “Bring me some cookies too!”

“Haven’t you had enough?” Kazuichi asked. “You’re like a machine.” Hajime wondered if that was a compliment, coming from him. Shaking his head, he made his way over to Mahiru.

“I think you’re brave,” he said, “to want to see Fuyuhiko after what happened.”

“Yeah?” Mahiru played with the folds of her skirt. “I don’t know. My mom was a war photographer. Going into something like that and still trying to take pictures showing the best in people…showing their smiles…that’s bravery. Smiling no matter what comes your way—that’s bravery. I like to think she found people smiling during the Tragedy too, you know? Even if it was just one person. But me, brave? I’m just doing whatever I can.”

Hajime thought for a few seconds. “After you—I mean, after we thought you died, Saionji made a memorial using some of your photos. We kept it right over there.” He decided against mentioning her other construction materials. It was the effort and thought behind that mattered, even if the actual product had been clumsy. Clumsy here being a euphemism for a ritual altar suited for satanic sacrifice. “Every day, we could see your photos. They were, and are, amazing.”

“Amazing, huh?” She narrowed her eyes. “That means nothing to me.”

She wasn’t just fishing for compliments. Hajime knew her better than that. She must have known what he meant, but still. Hajime tried to clarify what he meant. People told him that being blunt was what he was good at. “Looking at them fills me with, well, hope.” He couldn’t say the word without picturing Nagito’s dark and lonely eyes. “They’re reassuring, just like a smile. They remind me that we’re in this together.”

“Yeah?” Mahiru wouldn’t meet his gaze as she dug her shoe into the floor. “Thank you.”

Then they sat there, listening to Kazuichi fret over, “Miss Sonia,” until she’d had enough and stormed out of the restaurant. After a few minutes passed, with Hajime spending each second wondering how to make small talk with the Ultimate Photographer - he’d never been good at small talk - Hanamura pranced back in and offered Mahiru the plate of cookies with a dramatic flourish.

“No need to thank me,” he cried. “Your beauty does that already.”

“Ultimate Pervert,” she muttered. “It’s just disgusting. Thanks for the cookies.”

Hajime followed her down the stairs. Halfway down, she glanced back at him. Her hands shook, but the line of her jaw and the evenness of her shoulders signaled her determination. “Stay here,” she said. “Stay here and listen. Just in case. Please.” Hajime nodded, and Mahiru descended into the lobby and walked out of his line of sight.

“Hey, Fuyuhiko.” She sounded friendly enough. Friendly, but not at all confident. That wasn’t like her. Then again, she had been an accomplice to his sister’s murder, and he had been an accomplice to hers. What could you say to someone like that?

Even though Hajime couldn’t see Fuyuhiko, he heard the surprise in his voice. “Koizumi-san?”

She gave a short, sharp laugh. “I think we’ve reached the point where you can call me Mahiru.”
There were several seconds of silence before Fuyuhiko spoke again. “Look, Mahiru, I—I’m not the same person I was back then. What I—what Peko—what we—”

“I know,” Mahiru said softly. “I could tell the moment I saw you. I’ve always been told I have an eye for that. Maybe it goes along with being the Ultimate Photographer. I don’t know. I don’t think it’s anything all that special.” Hajime had never heard her sound like this before. “How’s she doing?”

“Peko? What do you care?”

“Would you believe me if I said I wasn’t mad?”

“No.”

“Good. Because I am. When I woke up and I came out of that—that pod-thing. I was confused. And then I saw her lying there, and I just, I don’t know. Everything went black for a second. I’ve spent the past day really thinking about it. I thought I should smash her pod to pieces.

Hajime stepped closer to the lobby. If Mahiru kept going on like this, then—

“But,” she continued, and that word froze Hajime. “Then I remembered what I told you in the beach house. About how revenge was wrong. I really meant that. So it wouldn’t do for me to act all hypocritical now. Don’t get me wrong!” Her sudden snap cracked the air like a whip; Hajime actually stepped back. “There’s no way what you and Peko did was right. Obviously it was wrong. But it would also be wrong for me to take revenge. Even now, I want to, I want to kill you both so badly that I’m scaring myself. See? I can’t stop my legs from shaking. But I know it would be wrong. Maybe—maybe that’s why I can seem so calm.”

A full minute passed in silence. Mahiru sighed. When she spoke again, her tone had reverted to normal. “I brought you these.”

“Mahiru?”

“I heard you haven’t eaten in over a day. So, you know. Here.” There was a slight clinking sound; Mahiru must have set down the plate. Another minute slipped away before she reappeared at the staircase. Her face was drawn inward in an attempt to smother her emotions. “Thank you,” she murmured as she passed Hajime. He raised an arm to stop her, but she’d already gone by, and the words he wanted to say dissolved in his mouth.

As he turned to follow her, a strange hissing sound caught his ear. It was definitely coming from the lobby. Fuyuhiko’s scream came a few seconds later. Hajime sprinted down the stairs just in time to witness Peko climbing out of her pod. She had the same long hair all of them had had, back when they’d first emerged from the Neo World Program. She teetered for a few seconds before falling to her knees. Fuyuhiko held her shoulders, crying, trying to steady her, or himself, or both. Seeing them collapse against or maybe into each other drove a spike through Hajime’s heart.

And when Peko whispered, “young master,” the thought that limped through Hajime’s mind was how boring it all was.

Number of Students: 9
Hey, and thanks for reading!

I apologize that it's taken me so long to use the notes function. I disregarded it at first, but then I thought better of it. I remembered that I wanted to thank all of you for taking the time to read this. It really does mean a lot to me, and I hope you are enjoying it as well. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you!

The next chapter will probably be out Saturday or Sunday.
Chapter Summary

Hajime reflects on his past and his future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day after Peko recovered, Hiyoko and Ibuki did as well. Hiyoko looked the strangest. While they’d only been in the Neo World Program for a little under a month, they hadn’t seen, or thought they hadn’t seen, the real Hiyoko in years. Her hair had grown wild in the short time they’d been in the program, but it was her body that truly stunned Hajime. She looked like a completely different person, as if she were Hiyoko’s taller, older sister.

Her temper had not grown with her. While Akane cut her hair, she spent the whole time cursing out Mikan, with a few lines reserved for Akane’s barber skills. Her outbursts made Hajime self-consciously feel his own hair. Akane seemed to be doing fine to him. None of the others had any haircutting experience, but Akane had cut her siblings’ hair all the time, since she said they never had the money to waste on a barber.

For Hiyoko’s part, the only person safe from her scorn with Mahiru. She tore into everyone else as if trying to make up for lost time. Sometimes she didn’t even wait for one of them to speak. When Kazuichi greeted her, she told him to “go back to pleasing yourself with thoughts of Miss Sonia.” Miss Sonia herself became “a murderous vixen who tried to have me killed.” And she wasn’t any kinder to the others. Hajime never got to the point of wishing she was still asleep, but he got pretty close.

It only worsened when Mikan woke up a few hours later. Hajime had walked into the lobby to find her sobbing next to her open pod. He’d been trying to keep a close eye on her because, out of everyone, she was the most likely to still be in despair. She cried and apologized and otherwise seemed like her normal self. Or…at least her simulated one. Hiyoko followed her around, bopping her on the head (now that she was tall enough to reach it, Hajime thought) and hurling insults until Mahiru pulled her aside. Hajime didn’t know what they talked about, but Hiyoko eased up on everyone, although he still caught her glaring at Mikan whenever the unfortunate nurse spoke.

Ibuki, on the other hand, didn’t seem to care that she’d died. Her vocal optimism breathed new life into everyone. She even tried to hold a concert the night she recovered, but since there weren’t any instruments on the island, she settled for walking around and singing as loudly as she could. By the time Hajime stumbled back to his cottage, his head pounded like a marching song. He wondered if this was being hungover felt like.

Something on the door caught his eye. There was a small, hand-drawn picture of him there that hadn’t been around earlier. It must have been Sonia. A quick look around revealed that the other cottages bore similar pictures. Seeing them all filled Hajime with a sense of déjà vu, as well as a lingering affection for the Ultimate Princess.

Entering his cottage, Hajime collapsed on the bed. Even though there wasn’t a monitor on the wall, his gaze kept drifting to the spot where it had been. He squeezed his eyes shut and lay in the
When he opened his eyes to see who’d called him, he found himself standing in a dimly lit classroom. He’d never seen it before, yet he instantly recognized it as Hope’s Peak Academy. Just seeing it filled his chest with a discomforting numbness, like a waterlogged ear. He’d hoped it would have stopped by now. The pain of betrayal. He’d been betrayed over and over. By Hope’s Peak. By Nagito. By Hanamura, Peko, Mikan, and Gundham. But the pain never ceased. He wondered if it ever would.

“Pain is boring.”

Hajime whirled around. He was standing there. No, not ‘he’ – Izuru. Izuru Kamukura. His red eyes smoldered like coals in the darkness. Hajime’s throat dried as he tried to form words. Izuru kept talking. “Pain is only interesting in tiny intervals. In the moments its magnitude changes. For a second or two, measuring it becomes impossible. But it quickly becomes boring again.”

“S-shut up,” Hajime choked out. “Are you saying what I feel is boring?”

Izuru didn’t move. His stillness unsettled Hajime. He didn’t shift his weight or cock his head. His shoulders didn’t even move as he breathed. “Feelings are not boring.”

“Huh?”

“Hope and despair. I found amusement in such things, for a time. People acted in manners inconsistent with my expectations. The ability to defy reason is an interesting skill. I wanted to see despair and hope and decide for myself. You saw my conversation with Junko Enoshima. Would you like to see the conversation that convinced me to give hope a chance?”

Hajime didn’t answer. He couldn’t. His mind had stopped responding. What he was looking at couldn’t be real. This valley of despair had to be some sort of illusion. A trick. He wouldn’t believe it. There’s no way he would believe it. Chiaki couldn’t possibly be there, lying in her own blood. It oozed out from her body. But it couldn’t be. It couldn’t be.

His denials shattered like shards of glass. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to run or close his eyes, but he couldn’t do any of that. All he could do was watch. Watch Chiaki’s blood spill out of her body and over his feet, legs, waist, arms, face.

Like a spell lifting, his body unfroze. He sunk to his knees. The blood evaporated. His body shook and shivered as if he’d dove into arctic waters.

“I showed you that image before,” Izuru said. “You pushed it aside. Was that a coping mechanism?” His tone sounded as still as his body.

“W-w-what do y-you want?” Hajime managed to ask.


Hajime’s eyes flew open. The blank ceiling stared down at him. The gentle rhythm of the ocean poured through the window. He was in his cottage. Safe. Everything was okay. Kicking off his sheets, Hajime put on his pants and went outside. The night air settled over his skin. The ocean waves sang in the distance. Hotel Mirari slumbered in the darkness with the rest of his comatose friends. Nekomaru. Gundham. Even Nagito. At the rate things had been going, with any luck, they’d all be awake within two to three days.
Luck, huh. For the Ultimate Lucky Student, it did seem strange that Nagito hadn’t recovered first. A sea breeze raised goosebumps on Hajime’s exposed chest and arms, and he retreated back inside his cabin.

At the very least, he hoped that his friends slept peacefully, undisturbed by Izuru, Junko, or their own memories of despair. After everything that had happened, they deserved to have a little peace. They’d have to overcome many challenges together. Hajime had known that when he’d chosen this path. But everyone who had died – none of them got a choice. What would they think? Would they be willing to stand with him? So far, everyone had, or at least they appeared to. But did they really feel that way? What if some of them still harbored feelings for despair? What would he do then?

Hah. Hajime shook his head. What was happening to him? They’d gotten through all of Monokuma’s trials by working together, trusting and believing in one another. So what right did he have to start doubting them now? It wouldn’t do for the leader to doubt his followers. They would all cooperate and build their own future, side by side, together. No matter what, he couldn’t allow Chiaki’s sacrifice to be meaningless. She was the one who believed in everyone. The one who showed them that, together, they could overcome any despair.

That was the future that he’d chosen.

Number of Students: 12

Chapter End Notes

Hi, everyone!

I actually got this out a day early! Hooray!

Anyway, thanks for reading! Feel free to leave a comment or other response to share your thoughts or offer suggestions.

Have a wonderful day, and happy reading!
When Hajime awoke the next day, the sunlight had already moved from its usual position on the far wall and was instead frolicking about on the floor. That light pattern meant it couldn’t have been morning. What time was it? Without a clock in his room or the Monokuma announcements, he had no way to be sure. He got dressed and rushed outside and almost immediately crashed into Nekomaru.

“Why, good afternoon, Hajime!” Boomed the Ultimate Team Manager. “Sleeping in once in a while is fine, but don’t make it habit! Gyahaha!”

“N-Nekomaru?” Hajime rubbed his eyes. Nope, he was definitely awake this time. Which meant....

“When did you—”

“Gyahaha!” Nekomaru tried to clap Hajime on the shoulder and ended up nearly breaking his collarbone. “Early this morning. Akane and Kazuichi filled me in.” Knowing those two, Nekomaru had likely gotten an incomplete story. “It sounds like you’ve done wonderfully,” Nekomaru continued. “Yes. You’ve been a great leader! Your manager is so proud! It makes me want to cry.” He folded his arms over his large chest. “Humph. Truly there is no greater reward for a manager than to observe his students shining!”

“We’re just glad to have you back,” Hajime said. He hadn’t gotten used to this kind of praise any more than when Twogami had done it. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not.

Nekomaru laughed. “Now then, I must go spar with Akane.”

“Wait, hold on! You just woke up! There’s no way you’re in any condition to—”

“Nonsense!” The ground shook from the weight of his cry. “Mikan said the same thing. ‘Nidai-san, you’ve been in a pod for several weeks. You need to take it easy.’ But I can’t let my pupils down! I am NEKOMARU NIDAI! I’m perfectly fine, see?” He pounded his chest. He actually pounded his chest. Who did he think he was, King Kong?

“W-well,” Hajime gulped. The futility of stopping Nekomaru pressed down on him. “Just be careful, okay? Don’t overdo it.”

“I accept your terms!” Wearing a grin nearly as large as his face, Nekomaru headed toward the beach. Hajime shook his head. The fighting instinct those two had was something he thought he’d never understand.

What should he do today? They hadn’t even been on the island a week, and already, the lack of options settled in his mind like a coiled snake. How much of that was Izuru’s influence? He didn’t know, and not knowing frightened him. It was an even worse feeling than it had been with Nagito.
After all, he couldn’t talk to anyone about it. Naegi – Hajime still couldn’t decide on the proper honorific to use – had given them a phone with his number. It was highly advanced and supposedly capable of calling him even from Jabberwock Island. No Internet though. He said to call if they ever needed anything. That probably didn’t include being a listener while Hajime dumped his worries on him. He himself had been supposed to call them once he’d returned to the Future Foundation. It felt strange that he hadn’t yet. Maybe they were busy trying to come up with a cover story.

Hajime shook his head. He was being too negative again. Their friends had been waking up. Nekomaru had returned to them, again, for real this time. There was nothing to be upset about. That’s right. Their future looked bright.

He exited the hotel and headed toward the bridge. As he passed the ranch, he heard Hiyoko and Mahiru laughing. It was nice that those two were still getting along. He paused for a moment to listen to that laughter. It comforted him in a way he didn’t know how to express. It was just nice. Sure, the situation wasn’t as bad as when Monokuma forced everyone to kill each other, but it was still nice to know that not everything had been for nothing. If anything, their bonds had only grown stronger. If only that had happened sooner. If they’d managed to truly come together in the simulation, maybe Nagito wouldn’t have done what he did. And maybe Chiaki would still....

He continued walking until he’d reached the second island. He hadn’t had a whole lot of time to explore it yet. Much of it remained unchanged. The diner looked like it hadn’t been touched since the sixties. Both the pharmacy and library looked to be in good condition. Well, as good as could be expected. The volumes in the library were covered in dust, and some of them were falling apart. One book actually disintegrated in his hands, spewing bits of dusty paper everywhere. It almost looked more like confetti.

The ruin was nowhere to be seen. It was as if it hadn’t existed in the first place. That made sense. Since it had been the graduation site for the simulated world, it had no purpose in the real one. Still, its absence unsettled him. It reminded him of the missing Grape House in the picture Nagito had showed everyone. Just a hole where reality should have been. Or maybe it was the other way around, and reality was the hole filled only by fiction.

Hajime searched the island a second time, and then a third. He kept walking until the bundle of anxiety in his stomach loosened. Something about the tropical island atmosphere made it hard to stay worried for very long. Even when he’d first arrived here in the simulation, seeing everyone else relaxing and having fun had made him feel stupid for worrying so much. Everyone had been so kind back then. Even Nagito. Nagito had been the one who, more than anyone else, made him feel at ease. Like he was safe and among friends. And then Twogami had died and....

“H-H-H-Hinata-kun!” Only one person spoke that way. Sure enough, when he looked, he saw Mikan approaching him from the pharmacy. She stopped a respectable distance away. “I’m s-sorry for calling out to you so suddenly.”

“It’s fine. I’m happy to see you.” It wasn’t a lie, not exactly. For some reason, that thought reminded him of Nagito, and he resisted the urge to shake his head.

“H-happy?” Tears leaked out of her eyes. “Th-thank you!” She pressed her fingers together nervously. “I don’t know if anyone’s...been happy to see me...before.” Hajime didn’t think that was true, but he also didn’t feel comfortable commenting. Outside of Nagito, Mikan worried him the most. He would have liked to pretend he didn’t know why. But he couldn’t. He knew exactly why.

Even looking at her now, Hajime couldn’t escape that feeling of betrayal. That bitterness rotting in
his mouth and sucking away his heart. How easily Mikan strangled Ibuki! Slit Hiyoko’s throat. How she’d laughed after being caught. How she’d tried to use him as her alibi. But most of all, he hated how easily she’d cast aside all the time they’d spent together. Like it had meant nothing.

‘You guys consider that thing a friend,’ she had said. ‘That doesn’t make me happy. It just fills me with despair.’ That was all his friendship, everyone’s friendship, had meant to her. Despair. He knew it was stupid for him to feel this way, but the claws of resentment had already ripped into his heart. In that moment, he felt a strange kinship with Kazuichi. He didn’t want to be betrayed again.

“Your f-f-f-face looks s-scary, Hinata-kun,” Mikan sniffled. “Do you w-want me t-to take off m-my clothes?”

“No!” Seeing her fall back into this state perturbed Hajime. It concerned him as well, knowing that, even with her memories, she was still like this. But the possibility that she might be faking loomed in his mind, drawing him away from her like a current.

“You’re mad at me.” Mikan appeared to crumple into herself. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not…mad.” Parsing through his words and thoughts like this was starting to give him a headache. But after his experiences with everyone on the island, he knew he couldn’t be as blunt as he has been. He'd never meant to be rude. It was just that he was never good with words. He'd just been...average. Like he was at everything else.

Mikan looked at the ground. “Um, I just, um, wanted to say that, erm, most of the medicines in the pharmacy aren’t good anymore. I’ve saved some of them though. So, um, if you ever get sick, I can —”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Aaaah!” Mikan threw up her arms. “I didn’t mean to talk so much. I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine.” Hajime took a deep breath. “That was smart thinking on your part. Nice job, Mikan.”

She wiped her eyes with the end of her bandage, which didn’t seem sanitary. “Thank you.”

“There you are!” A voice interrupted them. Sonia ran over, somehow still managing to look graceful even while her dress unfurled behind her. And following her was—

“Gundham?” Hajime couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice.

“Yes,” Sonia chirped. “Is it not wonderful? I wanted you to know right away.”

“Fuhahaha.” Gundham chuckled. “Indeed, after one thousand years, the overlord has been freed from his icy prison. This, too, must be the will of causality.” It hadn’t been quite that long, but just seeing the eccentric breeder again was enough for Hajime.

“It’s so good to see you!” He exclaimed.

“Do not presume to rejoice at my resurrection!” Gundham lifted his arm. “You are a mere human. Nothing in your power could cleanse my stain from this world. But,” and as he raised his scarf to cover his mouth, his Four Dark Devas of Destruction scampered onto his shoulders, “I will thank you.”

“It’s so good to see you!” He exclaimed.

“Come,” Sonia spoke before anyone else could comment. She threaded her arm through Gundham’s. “We must find Kazuichi.” That struck Hajime as unnecessarily cruel, but before he
could say anything, they’d already left.

The recoveries seemed to be accelerating. That was a good thing, right? Maybe he should leave a note or something in the lobby, in case someone woke up when no one was around. Then again, Nagito was the only one left. Despite the tropical climate, Hajime shivered.

“Waaaaah!” Mikan sobbed. Truth be told, Hajime had forgotten about her. “Everyone will be awake soon. It’s a miracle!”

“You’re right.” Was he just being silly? Everyone was waking up. That was what they’d wanted all along, right? Then why did he feel so uneasy? Or was that uneasiness coming from someone else? Not for the first time, he wished Chiaki was here. She would know what to say. She’d probably tell him, “Hajime, you need to decide for yourself. You can do it. I think.”

Remarkably unhelpful, and yet… exactly what he needed to hear. He was the leader now. Maybe not an Ultimate—that was Izuru—but so what? He’d stopped Junko Enoshima and freed everyone from the Neo World Program. Yet he didn’t feel any more confident in himself. If anything, he felt like the same Hajime Hinata who’d passed out on the beach. What was he supposed to do from here? Mikan would just apologize again if he asked her. Ugh! He wanted to scream.

“H-H-Hinata-kun?” Somehow Mikan had managed to shrink even further. “W-W-What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing. I’ll see you later, Mikan.” Hajime turned away from her and headed back to his cabin. He needed to think. The sound of the ocean waves crashing against the beach matched his beating heart. The sun slowly reddened in the sky. It was the same sky he’d glanced at so many times in the simulation. Its size had dwarfed him then, too.

Help me. The words faltered on his tongue. Something in his heart refused to let him utter them. He felt that, once he did, he would break completely. So he stood in the dying light, unable to even open the door to his cottage, unable to anything, anything at all, except hope. Hope for a miracle.

Number of Students: 14

Chapter End Notes

Hey, all! Thanks again for reading, and I hope you enjoyed!

The next chapter will be a perspective shift to my favorite character. Oooh! I'm already excited!
The Final Student Awakens

Chapter Notes

So this is one of the chapters I was most worried about. Nagito is one of my favorite characters (of all time), and I really wanted to portray him to the best of my ability.

At the same time, I feel like Nagito is greatly misunderstood within the Danganronpa community, and I'm definitely planning to try and rectify that within this story. When I propose alternate takes on Nagito's actions (such as here, where I imply Nagito didn't necessarily want to save the traitor and kill all the Ultimate Despairs), I'm not just making them up. I'm trying out canon-compliant theories, and I'm more than happy to elaborate on those further if you have questions.

As you can tell by the "relationships," tag, I'm an unabashed Komahina shipper, but not necessarily in the sense you may think. The two definitely share chemistry, but it's more than that. These two are perfect complements to each other; each is absolutely necessary for the other's journey of healing and development. I'm not just looking at them as another stalker/tsundere/yandere/sex-crazed type of thing. Those are fun, and I myself enjoy reading some cute works like that. But I've only come across a handful of stories on this site which attempt to portray Komahina in a complex, dramatic, rewarding, and mature manner. I want to tackle this in a manner that's both canon-compliant and serious, in a manner that showcases both its virtues and its flaws.

TL;dr, it's really important for me to try and get this right.

I also want to thank everyone who's read this far, left Kudos, bookmarked, or even commented. It's the joy of knowing so many people are interested in this work that inspires me to keep going! So thank you! Thank you all so much!

The voice called his name. It was a bloody, broken voice, rich with the inevitability of death. It was the same kind he’d heard far too frequently. One of the passengers had spoken to him in the same voice after the plane crashed before succumbing to his injuries.

It called his name again. He didn’t want to look. He felt tired. So tired. But the voice was familiar. He knew it. He knew it from somewhere. So he opened his eyes.

Instantly a hand wrapped around his throat. A strong hand. A warm hand. It gripped tightly, so tightly that even if he could have lifted his arms, he couldn’t have freed himself. The voice spoke again. Warm air buffeted his face. “Why did you betray us?”

His eyes travelled up the hand, to the arm, to the short sleeve of the white shirt. Next came the top of that green tie. His heart crept into his throat as he permitted himself to look even higher. The jaw was set, firm, but there were traces of blood running down the cheeks. The lips, usually soft, had pulled back and mashed together into a fierce, feral scowl. And those gentle green eyes had frozen into a crystalline, vampiric red. Blood leaked out of them. There was blood everywhere. Running out of his nose, his eyes, his mouth, running out of every pore in his face. Even his ahoge wept blood.
“Why did you kill us?”

The voice cracked across him like a whip. He wanted to protest. He wanted to say that he hadn’t meant for this to happen. He wanted to say that he never wanted this. He wanted to tell the truth. But the hand on his throat was too tight, and he couldn’t say anything. The world seemed to be growing darker. He couldn’t imagine how that was possible.

“WHY DID YOU KILL ME?”

He awoke in darkness. His chest expanded outward as he drank in a massive helping of oxygen. That didn’t seem right. Air? Awake? Why awake? If he was awake, that meant his plan had failed. If his plan had failed, then everyone thought he’d tried to kill them. Not that he could blame them. He had said as much in his video message. Still, it seemed strange. They should have seen through him. He’d been lying, and there was no way someone like him could lie to them. Not successfully. Then again, it hadn’t been successful. Not if he was awake. His worthless talent had failed again.

Even at the beginning, he hadn’t lied. He’d never actually said he killed Togami. But they had thought he had. They thought scum like him could actually kill one of them. They actually imagined he was capable of it. If that had been the limit of their hopes, that would have been disappointing. But Hinata-kun had come through. Hinata-kun’s hope blazed like the sun. How lucky he was to witness such hope!

And then there’d been the despair of learning the truth. Hajime Hinata was Ultimate Despair. The talentless part he could stomach. Komaru Naegi had been talentless, but she’d had the potential to shine even brighter than her brother. But Ultimate Despair! Hinata-kun and everyone and even him—Ultimate Despair!

He froze. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw his arm rise of its will. Even in the darkness, the long red nails glittered, and the ghost of her laugh hummed in his ear.

“AAAAAAAAARGH!” The scream reverberated throughout his entire body. The hand loomed over his head like a monster, like a falling meteorite. If it touched him, he would die, he knew he would die, but not like this, not in the dark, hopeless, despairful, alone. Please not alone.

A hiss replaced the scream in his ears, and something rose over the hand. Glass and metal—a lid? That’s right, a lid. He was inside a pod. He’d been put in here for something. What was it? For—for—the Neo World Program. That’s right. The whole thing had been a simulation. A virtual world.

He climbed out of the pod. His legs trembled and collapsed. They couldn’t support even his tiny weight. His breathing came in short, ragged gasps. He disliked the way it sounded in his ears. His hair tickled the back of his neck. They’d only been in the program for about 3 weeks, and his hair had already grown too long. Not that it mattered. No one cared about someone like him. His own mother had never complimented his appearance, so it made no sense that anyone else would even care.

His clothes hugged his body as he stood. As long as he didn’t look at his hand, he’d be okay. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out a single glove and slipped it over the hand. His breathing eased, but he waited another minute or two just to be safe before examining his surroundings.

He stood in the lobby of Hotel Mirai. It was completely intact, so it was real. It looked almost exactly like it had back when he’d first seen it. There were fourteen other pods scattered around the lobby, all open. So he was the last one. They were all alive. But if they were all alive, that meant—
that meant – what did that mean? As Ultimate Despairs, they’d agreed to enter the program together. To kill each other so that Junko Enoshima could ensnare the Future Foundation. If everyone was alive, that meant they’d won. They’d defeated Junko, and he’d missed it! He’d missed it again!

Hot tears blurred his vision. He inhaled deeply, and the sudden rush of air flowing into his body made his head spin. His leg bent, dumping him to the ground again. This time, he didn’t try to stand. Trash like him belonged here. A half-laugh, half-sob echoed inside his body, and he clamped his mouth shut. Either he would die or the sob would, and after some time, it did. To experience the bad luck of missing out on Junko’s death and, on top of that, not even dying himself! His luck still wouldn’t release him. Why? Why?!

Nagito shuddered with such force that, for a second, he thought a bomb had detonated in his chest. The carpet of the hotel’s lobby was warm but rough against his face. The scent of dirt and sweat filled his nostrils. He needed to get ahold of himself. He knew that. He couldn’t face the other Ultimates like this. He couldn’t burden them with his misery.

Besides, this misery was worthless. How much good luck would it take to compensate for this? Nagito wanted to find out. And since the others had survived his trap—really, he’d been too conceited, thinking he could trap them—and beaten Junko, then their hopes must be more powerful than ever. They’d beaten their own despair! After all, there was no way hope could lose.

That thought unlocked his body, and he managed to climb to his feet. He needed to focus. How long had it been? Why had he and the others woken up at all? He scanned his surroundings again.

A package of bottled water caught his eye. It looked like it had been placed there for the people who recovered. But it was unopened. Why? To prove they weren’t poisoned? But if no one else had taken any, had they been placed there for him? No. That was impossible. Nobody would be concerned about trash like him. Shrugging, Nagito opened the package and drank one of the bottles in seconds. He hadn’t realized how thirsty he was until the water flowed down his throat. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Nagito continued his investigation.

On the back of his pod, he found some kind of device. It looked like a timer. At least, it displayed the date and time. It was already half past one in the morning, huh? He watched it for a while, but the numbers didn’t move. It must have stopped counting. Had it broken? Or had it achieved its purpose? Did that mean it had woken him up? Set the time for his recovery? He checked the other pods and found the same device, only with different numbers. So somebody had used this machine to awaken everyone at different intervals. But who? And why? Nagito made a mental note to ask Souda-kun about it.

Once he’d inspected the lobby to his satisfaction, he stumbled outside. His body still hadn’t adjusted to moving around, and he sat on the steps for a minute to catch his breath. The moon danced in the pool before him. Approaching it, he dipped his hand in the water. The moon wobbled and blinked at the disturbance, and Nagito withdrew his hand. Despite the island setting and his jacket, the night carried a lonesome chill with it. Humming to himself, Nagito walked around the pool and toward the cabins.

The others must have been asleep. How were they dealing with the news that they’d all been Ultimate Despair? If they defeated Junko, they must know. The fact that they were all here, alive, outside the game meant only one thing. They must have overcome even that despair. Their hopes would shine brighter than ever, brighter than all the stars in the night sky! He could barely contain his excitement. His plan had worked in the end. It always did. Because hope could never lose.

He stopped outside Hinata-kun’s cottage. The door was slightly ajar. Nagito’s lips suddenly felt
cracked and dry, and he ran his tongue over them. It was dangerous to leave a door open like that. What if one of their classmates was still full of despair? Nagito placed his palm around the handle. He would close the door for Hinata-kun. Even he was capable of that.

A sound from within stilled him. Nagito didn’t know how to describe it. It was a sound, but he felt it. It seeped into his bones like a black poison. If it affected him this strongly, then what was it doing to Hinata-kun? Shuddering, he opened the door.

Red, raptor-like eyes glowered at him from the darkness. The moonlight spilling in through the doorway didn’t reach the owner of those eyes. The air chilled Nagito’s skin. He reached for the light, but before he could even touch the switch, a hand appeared around his and yanked him deeper into the room. Nagito was dimly aware of the lock on the door clicking shut as he fell. He twisted toward his attacker. Breath escaped his body as his back crashed against the floor. The way his gloved hand fell reminded him of Monaca’s airship in Towa City, and a faint laugh burst from his lips. It was immediately extinguished by a sudden pressure on his chest.

“What do you want?” The words droned out of that mouth mechanically. Drip, drip, like a faucet. Nagito blinked a few times. His eyes had already adjusted to the darkness. That had definitely been Hinata-kun’s hand around his. And this—this was definitely Hinata-kun’s foot on his chest. Definitely Hinata-kun’s face glaring down at him. But that voice….

“Kamukura-kun?” The pressure on his chest increased. Nagito laughed as best he could. “Don’t you know?”

“Even though you seem to remember everything, I cannot see why you would come here,” His voice gave Nagito nothing to read. Neither did his face. It wasn’t at all like Hinata-kun, who always wore his emotions—like an open book? That didn’t sound right. Still, seeing this mask on Hinata-kun’s face disturbed Nagito in a way he couldn’t explain, which only disturbed him even more.

“Kamukura-kun?” Nagito couldn’t take deep breaths anymore. “You’re…Hinata-kun?”

“Hinata-kun?” The pressure eased just enough to let Nagito cough. “You came to see Hajime?”

“Did I?” Nagito attempted a shrug. “Who can say?” A moment passed with neither speaking. Nagito gave in first. “Kamukura-kun, I understand the desire to crush a bug like me, but that wouldn’t bring you any hope. And it wouldn’t bring either of us any despair, so—”

“You are still boring.”

“Ahaha. I’m sorry. Did you want to see her hand again?” There was no significant change in Kamukura-kun, but Nagito noticed the way his lips pressed together. “Don’t you want to know why I came in here?”

“It is irrelevant.”

“I suppose it is. I am irrelevant, after all. Can you understand that, Kamukura-kun?”

Something flashed in Kamukura-kun’s eyes, faster than Nagito could process. He blinked again, but when he opened his eyes, he saw a pair of light green ones staring down at him. All traces of red had vanished completely. Strange.

“N-Nagito?” Hearing Hinata-kun’s startled exclamation eased his nerves. “What are you doing here?”
“Being detained.” Nagito smiled. “I don’t mind being detained, especially not by you, Hinata-kun, but if you’d like to let me up, I would not object.”

Hinata-kun kindly moved his foot, and Nagito sat up, taking care to keep his eyes fixed on the other boy’s face. Hinata-kun definitely looked confused. He must not have been aware of being Kamukura-kun. His surprise at seeing Nagito in his room reinforced that hypothesis. “What happened?” Hinata-kun muttered, confirming it for Nagito. “I was asleep, and then suddenly you’re awake and in my room, and I’m standing on—you’re awake!” His gaze latched onto Nagito. “Nagito, how are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” Nagito said slowly. “You’re very kind, Hinata-kun, to show concern for trash like me.” As he said the words, Nagito wondered about that.

“Trash?” Hinata-kun sighed. “Nagito, I was worried about you.” Not knowing how to respond to that, Nagito kept silent. He had nothing to offer to Hinata-kun, so there was no reason for him to worry. In fact, even his worry was strange. Didn’t Hinata-kun believe that he had tried to kill him and everyone else? Ah, perhaps he was just being kind. Even so, to waste that kindness on him—it was more than he deserved. The bad luck coming for him would have to be enormous.

“Nagito.” Hinata-kun’s voice had hardened. Glancing up, Nagito saw that his face had too. “Why are you here?” His voice didn’t manage to get as cold as Kamukura-kun’s, but it came fairly close.

Nagito glanced at his glove. How best to answer…? “I didn’t come here to kill you.” That should relieve the other’s biggest worry. Just to be sure, he made eye contact. They stared at each other for a moment.

“You tried to kill us all before.”

Ah, there it was. He’d expected this. So why did it sting? Coming from anyone else, those words would have meant little. But this was different. The way Hinata-kun said them made Nagito want to take his hand and explain everything. He bit his lower lip. There was no way he had the right to do that. It shouldn’t matter anyway. The lack of trust felt all too familiar. And that lack of understanding—well, he should have expected that. It was impossible for someone as great as Hinata-kun to understand trash like—someone as great as Hinata-kun? There wasn’t time to think about it now, not while he needed to answer.

“Oh. Did I?” Nagito knew the question would frustrate his companion, but he wanted to return to the question in his mind. He needed more time. He felt he’d summed it up best right before the Funhouse trial, when he’d asked himself why he still cared about Hinata-kun. He was a talentless Reserve Course student. Ordinary. Boring. But he had decided to become Kamukura-kun, hadn’t he? Didn’t that mean he had strong hope? Was that all there was to it?

“Nagito!”

He looked up. “Sorry, Hinata-kun. Did you say something?”

The other boy’s expression didn’t change. “I said we’re no longer Ultimate Despair.” Of course they weren’t. They were here. That meant they’d won, and only hope could win. “We’ve decided to try and make amends for the things we did. All of us, together.”

Nagito stood up and brushed off his coat. Redemption, huh? “Are you saying you forgive me, Hinata-kun?” He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the floor. For a minute, the only sounds in the room were Hinata-kun’s quiet breathing and the faraway rhythm of the ocean. Nagito tried to ease his racing heart by concentrating on the former sound, but that only made it worse, so he switched to
the latter instead.

“You killed Chiaki.”

Nagito took care to keep his face blank. So his luck had found the traitor after all. And it had killed her. Had they chosen her, at random? Or had she sacrificed herself for them? To sacrifice herself for despair? An amazing Ultimate like her wouldn’t do that. But….

“Welcome back, Komaeda-kun.” She’d been the only one to greet him warmly after his extended absence from Hope’s Peak. She’d allowed someone like him to play her video games. But she died. She died a beautiful death full of despair, one of the deepest despairs he had ever experienced. By overcoming that despair, the hope of his classmates had—by overcoming—by….

“I didn’t want…. ” The words slipped out before he could stop them. “Ahaha.” He didn’t know whether that had been a groan or a laugh. He dug his nails into his palm. Hinata-kun was dangerous. Nagito always said more than he meant to around him. Something about the brunet made Nagito want to be understood. But that just meant Nagito needed to work harder to push him away. He’d already nearly confessed once. The nightmare he’d had in the pod resurfaced in his mind. Someone like him didn’t deserve to love Hinata-kun. He would only cause more trouble.

Hinata-kun placed a hand on his shoulder. Nagito flinched away from the contact. “H-Hinata-kun?”

“Look, Nagito, all of us did terrible things as Ultimate Despair. All of us. We’re all guilty. Most of us have probably done worse things than you. Even in despair, you fought for hope. And you didn’t directly kill anyone, since you spent most of your time as a Servant in Towa City. All of us want a second chance. That means we have to be willing to give each other one. We’re not doing this to be forgiven, but maybe, in time, we can forgive each other.” His eyes stared at Nagito as if he could see past him, past the lies and walls and masks. “I think, in time, maybe I can forgive you.”

This was too much! Hinata-kun really had grown. But he still had that core kindness and compassion. Why? Why would he waste those gifts on him?

“You’re too kind, Hinata-kun.” Nagito needed to escape before Hinata-kun changed his mind. “Trash like me doesn’t deserve it.” He caught Hinata-kun rolling his eyes. “It’s a lot to think about. I’d like to go back to my cottage now. I’ve wasted too much of your time already.” He opened the door, expecting Hinata-kun to object, to call him untrustworthy, to warn him not to try anything. But none of those things happened, and Nagito slunk into the night without another word. It took everything he had not to run to his cottage. He forced himself to walk, step by step, until his heart calmed. Once inside his room, his thoughts flowed freely again.

It had been silly of him to allow Hinata-kun to upset him so easily. Was it that nightmare? Partly, perhaps, but Nagito doubted it was that simple. But Hinata-kun said they wanted to bring hope to the world. A shining hope that would crush all the despair! And he could see it. What luck, what luck! A hope created by the Remnants of Despair would surely be brighter and stronger than any other. How wonderful, how beautiful it would be!

His gaze fell on the glove. He had to do something about that. That such a hopeless object was a part of him—unforgivable! His legs faltered, and he found himself on the ground yet again. Bile filled his throat. He tried vomiting, but since he hadn’t eaten properly in weeks, he could do little more than sputter. A strand of spit tumbled out of his mouth. He retched again. Nothing. Pathetic. How pathetic. He truly couldn’t do anything. Someone like him couldn’t be allowed that privilege.
A single sob, ten times stronger than the one from the hotel lobby, threatened to destroy his entire body. He choked it back down, nearly biting his own tongue in the process. His throat burned and ached all at once, and it might have been bleeding too. The hand inside the glove seared as if a hot knife had been thrust through it. Worst of all was the pain coursing through his veins. He knew it originated from his chest. It had never gone away, not even for a minute. Everything else left him. Everyone else suffered because of him. His dog. His parents. His classmates and teachers. Everything and everyone.

In the end, only three things stayed with him. His pain. His luck. And his hope.

“Yup,” he told the ground, not minding when the coarse wood pressed against his lips, his teeth. “I’m really lucky!” The still silence of the night demanded he repeat himself. “I’m really lucky! Really. I’m…really lucky.”

Number of Students: 15
Hajime Earns Hope Fragments

Chapter Summary

Hajime and the others decide their next move; talking to Teruteru, Kazuichi, and Nagito gives Hajime new insights into himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Hajime arrived at the restaurant, there weren’t as many people there as he’d hoped. Hanamura had already prepared breakfast. One of the tables lay buried beneath tray after tray of food. Hajime made a note to remind the Ultimate Cook that their supplies were limited. Still, he may have been a pervert, but at least he took his job of feeding everyone seriously.

Akane was there, eating. Because of course she was. Nekomaru sat across from her with a plate of food piled so high that it somehow rivalled her own. Hajime couldn’t decide whether to applaud or express concern. Mahiru and Hiyoko were present too, both with much more manageable helpings on their plates. Hiyoko, evidently having nothing to complain about, ate in silence. Mahiru was brushing Hiyoko’s hair and humming to herself. It almost made the restaurant feel homey. No, that couldn’t be it. He must be overthinking things again.

“Good morning!” Mahiru sent a quick smile his way.

“Mornin’, Hajimeme.” Akane did not swallow before eating.

“Good morning, everyone.” Hajime stifled a yawn. “Where are the others? Everyone’s awake now, so I thought we should discuss our next move.”

“Indeed, that is a wise decision.” Twogami nodded sagely from his corner of the room. Hajime wondered how he’d missed him; the man’s white suit and bulk didn’t do much in the way of camouflage.

“If everyone’s awake, then that means that creep Nagito is too, right?” Hiyoko’s voice hadn’t changed with her appearance, so hearing that childlike speech spew out of that adult body still unsettled Hajime. Every time he looked at her, it took him a few seconds to remember that, yes, this was Hiyoko now. “We should tie him up again. And then we should kill that toilet-clogging bitch, Peko.”

“You want to say that again, you little shit?” Fuyuhiko’s bark caused everyone in the room to turn toward the staircase. He and Peko stood there, side-by-side, which only heightened their difference in stature.

“Now, now,” Nekomaru began. “There’s nothing wrong with a little shit.”

Hiyoko stood up. “I said—”

Mahiru pulled her back down. “Stop that. If you move, I can’t fix your hair.”

Hiyoko scowled but stayed silent. Fuyuhiko snorted. “It’s obvious what we need to do now. We
should contact the Future Foundation and let them know what’s happened. We also need to keep an eye on Nagito and make sure he doesn’t try anything.”

“Mikan too,” Hiyoko muttered.

“Is that necessary?” Hajime shifted his weight. “I don’t think he’ll do anything.” As he said that, he remembered finding Nagito in his cottage last night.

“Trust me,” Fuyuhiko growled. “You may not have known him then, but even before Junko, he was a crazy bastard.”

“We should bop Mikan on the head until she barfs,” Hiyoko sneered.

“Mmmm. I don’t really get it,” Akane said, “but I never liked him anyway, so do whatever ya want.”

“Now hold on!” Nekomaru’s voice blasted the air apart. “Nagito’s part of this team too. If everyone’s getting a second chance, so should he.”

“We don’t have to give anyone a second chance,” Hiyoko said. “Especially not a nasty slut like Mikan.”

“Good nom-nom-nomming!” The greeting cry silenced everyone. Ibuki bounded into the room. “Wow! Everyone’s tension is super high! What are we talking about?”

“I, too, see value in the acquisition of information.” Gundham swept into the room from the lobby stairs. Sonia had her arm intertwined through his. “However, I shall expect it to be worth my time.”

“Indubitably,” Sonia cheered.

Fuyuhiko sighed. “As I was saying, we were deciding what to do about Nagito. I mean, he tried to kill us all for being Ultimate Despair. And we’re still Ultimate Despair. Or at least, it’s still a part of us.”

Hajime thought about how Nagito had looked last night. For the most part, he had seemed as insane as he had in the game. But when he’d brought up Nagito’s trial and Chiaki, there had been a moment when Nagito faltered. Nagito had always been impossible to read, but Hajime felt confident this time. “I think we can trust him.” He cleared his throat. “None of us are innocent here.”

“Especially not Mikan,” Hiyoko said.

“Enough,” Mahiru shushed her.

“So, what then?” Fuyuhiko growled. “Do we vote?”

“Fuyuhiko!” Sonia disentangled herself from Gundham and marched over to him. “Have we not doubted our friends enough? We have finally escaped from that game, and you still want to play by its rules? That is foolish! I am tired of doubting my friends. I want to believe in them.”

“Friends?” Fuyuhiko practically spat the word. “You think we can be friends with that psycho?”

“Young master.” Peko laid a hand on his arm. Her startling red eyes softened behind her glasses. “Have you forgotten everything we did under the influence of despair? Psycho is a word that implicates all of us.” From those soft red eyes, Hajime thought he saw a single tear glisten on her
cheek, but she turned away before he could be sure. “If you order it, I will deal with Nagito or anyone else. However, we acted in haste before.” Mahiru said nothing, but Hajime noticed the way she twisted in her seat. “I do not wish to do so again.”

“Goddammit!” Fuyuhiko slid his hands into his suit pockets. “Fine.”

“So,” Hiyoko said after a moment. “About Mikan….”

“Speaking of Mikan,” Hajime jumped in before Hiyoko demolished his patience completely, “does anyone know where she is? Or Kazuichi, Nagito, and Hanamura-kun, for that matter?”

“Teruteru’s in the old building,” Mahiru said. “That’s where he made breakfast. I helped him bring food in here earlier.”

“Ibuki saw Kazuichi-chan on her way to the hotel,” exclaimed the energetic musician. “He was heading to the market.”

“So no one’s seen Mikan since yesterday, and no one’s seen Nagito at all? Since he escaped his pod?” Fuyuhiko clicked his tongue. “I’m telling you, he’s working on a way to kill us all right now.”

“I saw him,” Hajime countered. “I don’t really know when it was. Maybe a couple hours after midnight. He was—” he paused. If he told them Nagito had been inside his cottage, that would only heighten their mistrust. “He was heading to his cottage.” It wasn’t a lie, not exactly, but it still left a bitter taste on his tongue. The worry he’d spent yesterday trying to soothe re-emerged in full force. Both Mikan and Nagito hadn’t been seen in hours. If either one really was planning something….

“Ibuki will look for Mikan-chan!” The Ultimate Musician waved her hand in the air despite already volunteering herself.

Great.” Fuyuhiko picked up a plate and headed to the food table. “Then Hajime can go look for Nagito.”

“Me? Why me?”

Fuyuhiko rolled his eye. “You’re his favorite, aren’t you? I mean, back in that simulation, you’re the only one who, well, knew him.” Hajime wanted to laugh. He knew Nagito? He was Nagito’s favorite? That had to be wrong. Every time he took a step closer to understanding Nagito, the white-haired boy pushed him back two. He lied so easily and spoke so cryptically that understanding what went on in his head was impossible. When he waited with Hajime on the beach and joked with him about what his talent might be. When he proudly proclaimed a belief that none of the Ultimates would ever kill Twogami even though he himself had planned to. He’d even helped Hajime investigate. All of that was lies.

Do you really believe that?

Hajime recognized the disaffected voice instantly. Shut up, Izuru.

Your lack of intellect frustrates me.

Better than being bored, right?

I thought you were smarter than this. I suppose you really can’t see in the dark.
The voice quieted down before he could tell it to shut up. Its absence did little to mitigate the sting of its words. I thought you were smarter than this. I suppose you really can’t see in the dark. Those words snagged in his mind. They were familiar somehow. That was it! Nagito had said something similar during the first trial.

“Um, Hajime?” Sonia touched his shoulder. “Are you feeling alright? You have not been answering us, and you look upset.”

“Sorry. I’m just tired, I guess.” He attempted a smile.

“So anyway,” Fuyuhiko continued, “we should call the Future Foundation, right?”

“Can we even do that?” Asked Mahiru.

“Yeah,” Hajime answered. “Naegi-san gave me a phone. Supposedly it can work even all the way out here, without any cell towers around. But, uh,” and he felt his ears growing hot, “I forgot to charge it.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Hiyoko laughed. So much for her trying to change.

“It’s not a problem,” Peko said. “Just plug it in downstairs. There should be an outlet in the lobby.”

“You want to fail at guarding it again?” Hiyoko strode over to her. “You want to jam another toilet?”

“Hey, Hiyoko,” Mahiru pulled her away before Fuyuhiko could rip her head off. “Why don’t we go pick up some gummies at the market, okay?” Hajime doubted whether or not they would have any, or that they would still be edible, but Hiyoko didn’t share that doubt. She laughed and grabbed Mahiru’s hand. Mahiru’s gaze met Hajime’s, and she gave a small, apologetic shrug before exiting the restaurant.

Once they were gone, Fuyuhiko threw himself into a chair. “I can’t keep dealing with her.”

“Leave it to Mahiru,” Nekomaru thundered. “The two of them are quite close.”

“She’s always loud,” Akane said as she refilled her plate. Not that she was one to talk. But the conversation ended there. Peko sat next to Fuyuhiko, and the two of them conversed in low voices. Sonia cooed over one of Gundham’s hamsters while Gundham himself got her a plate of food. Hajime wandered into the lobby and found an outlet for the phone. It would take maybe two hours to charge. That gave him enough time to check on the others.

Stepping outside the hotel, he nearly crashed into Hanamura, who was carrying a large silver tray of food, likely meant for those still inside the hotel. “Hinata-kun!” The Ultimate Cook’s—Chef’s—greeting sounded a lot like a squeal. “Have you eaten?”

“Hi, Hanamura-kun. No, not yet. I was just—”

“You should, Hinata-kun.” He almost sounded like Mahiru. “It’s very important for a man to satisfy his cravings.” Never mind. “I insist you at least take a bowl of rice.” Hanamura rotated to tray so Hajime could grab one.

He did so. “Thanks.”

Hanamura sighed. “If supplies weren’t so limited, I could have mixed it with natto and an egg. Then it would have been so much better. A product like this is unworthy of the Hanamura name.”
If he was aware of their limited supplies, why had he made such a lavish breakfast? Hajime shook his head. “Your family ran a diner, right?”

“Shhh! Not so loud!” There wasn’t anyone else around to hear them though. Hanamura lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “That’s right. But one day, I want to run a five-star restaurant. And not just for Japan. Americans, Englishmen, Chinese—I want the Hanamura name to be known around the world.”

“Fame and fortune, huh?” Hajime decided to be generous and avoid mentioning the third potential motive of women.

Hanamura ran a hand through his hair. “Well, sort of.” He’d lost his usual flair. His eyes, usually brightly fixed upon whomever interested him, stared at the ground. “It’s more like…I want Momma to be proud. Since I couldn’t keep my promise to her, I want to do my best for her this time around.”

“Teruteru!” The chef’s first name left his lips so easily that he almost missed it.

Teruteru smiled. “I should bring this to the others.” Hajime nodded, unsure what more to say. The man’s constant, lewd comments irritated him, but every once in a while, he would drop the façade, and Hajime would find himself liking him a bit more. It had been like that with the others too. Fuyuhiko, Gundham—even Nagito and Hiyoko. That’s right, he realized. All of them had little flashes, tiny moments where understanding, true understanding, became possible. Monokuma had once said it wasn’t. He’d said people had different experiences and upbringings, and so it was impossible for them to understand each other. Maybe the first part of that was true, but even so, it should still be possible for people to understand each other. At the very least, Hajime wanted to believe it was.

“Teruteru!”

At the top of the stairs, Teruteru turned back. “What is it, Hajime?”

“Thank you.”

The Ultimate Chef nearly dropped his tray. “Why are you thanking me?”

“You just…” Hajime shook his head. He didn’t know how to say it without sounding really cheesy. “You helped me realize something.” Something he should have already realized a long time ago, but there was no need to say that. “So thank you.”

“Could it be?” Teruteru leaned toward Hajime, but since he was so far away, the gesture looked fairly dumb. “You’ve finally realized your love for me? Well, I’m a very busy man, but—”

“Bye, Teruteru!” Hajime rounded the pool and reached the cottages before realizing he had no chopsticks with which he could eat. The bowl of rice warmed his palm. He didn’t want to eat with his hands, but he didn’t want to go back to get chopsticks either. Maybe there would be some in the market.

Fortunately, there were, though Hajime felt mildly guilty breaking open a small box of them just to take a pair. It wasn’t like they could pay for anything here – thankfully, both the vending machine and the Monocoins were gone – but even so.

The market seemed strangely quiet. Hiyoko and Mahiru were supposed to be here, weren’t they? He peeked along a few aisles but didn’t see them anywhere. He did, however, hear something clink, followed by a quiet curse. It came from further back in the store.
"Hello?" He called.

"WAAAAH!" The scream was so high-pitched that, for a second, he thought it belonged to Mikan. But then Kazuichi stepped out from behind a shelf. "Jeez, Hajime, don’t scare me like that." Um… all he’d done was say hello. He pushed his objection aside.

"Kazuichi? What are you doing? We missed you at breakfast."

"Really?" He adjusted his garish jumper. "Even Miss Sonia?" Hajime hesitated. Kazuichi adjusted his gray beanie too. "Sorry, but I’ve been a bit busy."

"Busy? Doing what?"

"What? Nothing. Nothing at all. You don’t need to worry. I’m not doing anything. Okay? Okay. All done." This was even more suspicious than the way he’d acted when – "You didn’t tie up Nagito again, did you?"

"What? No! Of course not!" Hajime crossed his arms and said nothing. "I didn’t! I really didn’t. Don’t make that face. Look, I’ll show you." He stepped back around the shelf. Hajime followed. On the ground, there looked to be an – arm? Yeah, that was definitely a mechanical arm, or at least the framework of one. What was this? What was going on here?

As if he’d read his mind, Kazuichi piped up. "Look, I was just – Nagito – I thought maybe—"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down. Nagito asked for a new arm?" The glove Nagito had worn last night resurfaced in his vision. "Junko’s hand!"

"Yeah, that’s pretty much it." Kazuichi lifted the metal appendage over his head. "Except Nagito didn’t ask. He doesn’t even know about it yet. I don’t have the parts to make Fuyuhiko a new eye, but there’s enough scrap around that I think I can set up a rudimentary arm." As if on cue, the device folded over in his grip. "Maybe."

"It’s really nice of you to do something like that for Nagito."

Kazuichi’s face reddened. "Yeah, well." Sensing he wanted to say more, Hajime waited. "That’s… I mean, this is embarrassing to say, but that’s thanks to you, you know?"

"Me?" Hajime blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Well." Kazuichi scratched the back of his neck. "I’ve been betrayed before, in the past. I think I told you that before. And because of that, I’ve had a lot of trouble trusting people. Nagito definitely made that worse. I mean, I even thought you were the traitor. When I said that, I was scared. I guess, well, I didn’t think about, you know, how you felt. It must have hurt you. You even wanted to hit me at one point. I’ve thought about it a lot since then, and I realized why it bothered me so much. It was because, by doubting you, I was betraying you. In a way."

The whole time, Kazuichi kept his eyes on the robotic hand. His shoulders slumped slightly. Hajime wasn’t sure what any of this had to do with building Nagito a new hand, but he understood Kazuichi’s desire to avoid eye contact. The entire conversation was awkward. He didn’t want to be rude, but this kind of praise made him uncomfortable. Nagito, Twogami, Nekomaru, and now Kazuichi – all of them had continually praised him, held him to a standard Hajime knew he couldn’t uphold. In that way, it had almost been a relief when Nagito learned the truth and stopped idolizing him.

"So, yeah. Anyway." Kazuichi began gathering the parts still littering the floor. "He’s still creepy.
But if we’re all getting second chances, then that includes him. I guess I was kind of a jerk. Besides,” and his face brightened as he grinning at Hajime, “I get to build an arm. An arm!”

“Well, it’s no rocket,” Hajime said.

“Come on, man,” Kazuichi moaned. “Don’t be like that. I’ll definitely build one someday. A real one.”

“I know you will.” Hajime offered his hand. Before he could think about why he’d done that, Kazuichi accepted the gesture.

“Thanks, Hajime.”

He nodded. If they’d been in the simulation, he knew he’d have just earned another Hope Fragment. But that nightmare was over now. Leaving Kazuichi to his work, he exited the market.

The rice had mostly cooled, but it still tasted amazing. By the time he reached the beach, his bowl was empty. Its weight hung awkwardly in his hand. Here the sand was soft, and it formed small clouds with every step he took. The sight of another person sitting on the shore held him in place. He’d hoped to come here to be alone so he could think. He felt talked out, especially since the other person was Nagito.

Holding in a sigh, Hajime sat in the shade of a palm tree. A sea breeze curled through his hair. He placed the empty bowl down next to him. Nagito also looked to be lost in thought. Maybe if he stayed quiet, he wouldn’t be noticed.

“Hinata-kun!” Well, so much for that. This time, Hajime didn’t bother restraining his sigh. “What brings you out here? Ah, you didn’t come to see me, did you? Of course not. Someone like you would never—”

“Shut up.” Hajime had zero interest in hearing Nagito’s long, self-deprecating monologues. The other boy fell silent, though his gaze kept sliding to Hajime and then back again. How many times would Hajime feel like sighing this morning? “What’s with all the ‘someone like me’ nonsense anyway? You did it last night too. Did you forget? I’m just a worthless Reserve Course student.”

He winced as he realized he’d done a very poor job concealing his bitterness. Then again, why should he? He hadn’t been afraid to show his true feelings in the simulation, so why hide them now? He’d been trying to be more patient with everyone, but that didn’t mean he needed to lie or conceal his feelings.

“Ah.” The other boy linked his fingers together. “I did say that. But didn’t you see my video message? I believe I also said that I shouldn’t have made fun of you. Sometimes I wonder, if I’d been physically capable, would I have done the same thing?”

The question felt rhetorical, but Hajime pursued it anyway. “Physically capable? The same thing? What are you talking about?”

Nagito traced his finger through the sand. “Hope’s Peak Academy,” he finally said. Hajime’s heart quickened. Did Nagito know the truth?

“Are you saying you weren’t mad that I was a Reserve Course student?”

Nagito shifted. “Even a common, ordinary person can produce a brilliant hope. The hope of a talentless person can shine even brighter than a talented one. It can inspire other weak and boring people. Like you, Hinata-kun! You overcame Ultimate Despair! You sacrificed yourself, your very identity, to try and become hope. It’s amazing!”
A fire roared in those light-gray eyes. “Ahahahahahahahaha! Did you think it would work?”

“N-Nagito?”

Before Hajime could move, Nagito crawled on top of him. Nagito’s arms rooted in the ground on either side of his legs, trapping him. His body hovered a few centimeters above his. Hajime fought back the urge to kick him away. But with his back against the tree, he had nowhere to go.

“Did you think you could become hope? Someone like you? You thought you were worthy? You thought you could ever be worthy? Someone like you?”

“Nagito, stop it!” To his surprise, Nagito obeyed instantly. He scooted back, and Hajime pulled his legs up to his chest. The ocean waves chased the echo of Nagito’s laugh from his mind. “It wasn’t like that. I just…I wanted to become someone Chiaki could be proud of. Someone I could be proud of. I wanted to be confident in myself.”

After saying that, he couldn’t keep avoiding Nagito’s gaze. It would have been a betrayal of his own conviction. The insanity had melted from Nagito’s face. A contemplative stare replaced it.

“Hinata-kun. Confidence doesn’t come from having talent.” That breathy voice actually sounded reasonable. Wasn’t Nagito living proof of that? He had a talent, but he had even less confidence in himself than—Mikan! Mikan, too, was an Ultimate, and yet….

“Chiaki said the same thing,” he admitted. “I’ve been trying, I really have, but…” He paused. Why was he telling this to Nagito, of all people? It didn’t make sense. Nagito had betrayed everyone. And not even just his suicide — Nagito had betrayed him personally. Seeing his true nature leak out during the first trial destroyed his image of Nagito. But, here and there, he would glimpse that friendly persona within the boy sitting near him now. Was that why, despite everything, he still felt a bond with him?

Nagito was a mess of mysteries. It was just like he’d thought earlier—every time he got closer to understanding him, Nagito pushed him back again. He certainly worked to make it difficult, trying to keep everyone in the dark with his lies all the—in the dark? Izuru’s words from earlier replayed in his mind.

“Hinata-kun? You’ve been sitting there with a scary look on your face. Monokuma’s game is over now, but are you still thinking of killing me? If that would bring hope, I don’t—”

“Nagito.” He grit his teeth. After all the worry about bringing all their friends back, he’d forgotten just how little value Nagito placed on his own life. A shiver ran down his body. What was that just now? He felt like he’d hit on something. No, it couldn’t be…could it? “Nagito, can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Hinata-kun!” The other boy sat back on his heels. “For you to take an interest in trash like me — oh, I’m so happy!”

Hajime pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn’t keep dealing with this. On one hand, he hated feeling that way. It felt too cold, too unfeeling toward the other. It was tragic that Nagito genuinely felt this way about himself. Part of Hajime wanted to hug him and tell him that he was wrong. He wasn’t trash. But on the other hand, every time Nagito spoke that way, the scars in Hajime’s heart throbbed. It reminded him of how he’d felt as a Reserve Course student, gazing up at Hope’s Peak Academy with so much admiration that it was impossible for him to contain it.

Hajime pushed aside Hope’s Peak Academy. Right now, he needed to deal with Izuru and Nagito. “Did you really try to kill Twogami?”
“He’d been a very capable leader,” Nagito said. “But I think you’re doing even better! Hinata-kun, the hope you’ve given everyone is truly amazing! You deserve to be called the Ultimate Hope!” Hajime barely avoided flinching. Nagito couldn’t possibly know that he was Izuru, could he? They’d never meant at Hope’s Peak Academy. In fact, no one who had died in the simulation knew who he really was. That hadn’t been intentional. Hajime didn’t enjoy keeping his friends in the dark, but he didn’t know how to tell them.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” he said, mostly to shift the conversation off of him.

“Do you think I didn’t try to kill Twogami-kun?” Nagito tilted his head. “But I went for the knife.”

“But it was dark,” Hajime pressed onward. “Even if you’d gotten the knife, there’s no way you would have been able to find anyone, let alone stab them.”

“No, that’s wrong. Twogami-kun had night vision goggles, remember? He would have come to me.”

“No, that’s not it.” There was a clear contradiction in what Nagito had said. “You didn’t know Twogami had goggles. You mentioned that several times during the trial. So there’s no way you could have known he would go after you.”

“You’re forgetting my talent, Hinata-kun. Not that I blame you. It is worthless. But I could have retrieved the knife and trusted my luck to guide me.”

Anger boiled inside Hajime. His fingers itched with the urge to grab the white-haired boy by the throat and force him to confess. He took a deep breath instead. “Then what about the blood?”

“Blood?”

“Yes. Even if you had managed to locate and stab someone in the dark, their blood would have gotten all over you. Once the lights came back on, you’d have been discovered right away.”

A wry smile passed across Nagito’s lips, and he turned toward the ocean. “Then what was my plan, Hinata-kun? I caused the blackout. I hid the knife. Are you suggesting I did those things for my own amusement?”

“You wanted to die,” Hajime said, trying to keep his voice steady. “You wanted to be the one who died under that table.”

Nagito looked directly at him. “Why would I want that?”

“To create hope,” Hajime answered immediately. “Or at least your twisted version of it.”

Nagito licked his lips. “I see.” He stood up. “You’ve grown, Hinata-kun.”

Hajime stood up too. “Was I right?”

Nagito smiled again. It was the same plastic smile Hajime had seen dozens of times. By now, he easily recognized it as fake. Perhaps sensing that, Nagito began moving past him.

“Answer me!” Hajime demanded.

Nagito raised an eyebrow. Another breeze lifted the end of his coat. He slid his hands into his pockets and kept walking,

“Nagito…please.”
He glanced back at Hajime over his shoulder. The corners of his lips lifted into a slightly different smile. “Mostly, Hinata-kun.”

He walked away, leaving the wind to carry his words.

Number of Students: 15

Chapter End Notes

I cannot believe this has gotten 1,500 hits in about 2 weeks. That's insane! Thank you all so much! I'm so so so so so glad to know you're all enjoying the story so much!

I have the next chapter written - it's a really short POV shift to Mahiru. I didn't originally plan to write it at all, but while I was writing this chapter, I got the idea for that one. I was going to post it today, but I don't have anything else written after that. I've tried to stay at least one chapter ahead so I could publish twice a week. I think I'll hold onto that one until I get the chapter after it written.

Anyway. Please read and enjoy!
Mahiru glanced at the photographs in her cottage. She didn’t have as many as she would have liked. Back in the simulation, she’d been able to cover a large portion of the wall, if she’d wanted. But here, she only had a few of her most important ones. There were a few from her time at Hope’s Peak Academy. Of those, her favorite was, ironically, one of the only ones she hadn’t took herself. Sato had convinced her to let a passing student take it instead. In the picture, she, Mikan, Sato, Hiyoko, and Ibuki were all smiling. Smiling brightly. The picture had been taken outside, of course, since Reserve Course students weren’t allowed inside the main building. Mahiru had always hated that rule, but what could she do? Her talent wasn’t all that impressive. No one would listen to her if she objected. She’d thought about campaigning to get that rule revoked a few times, but then Sato had…and after that, it just didn’t matter anymore.

Her fingers brushed against another picture. This was one of the only ones she had of herself with both her mother and father. Being a war photographer, her mother was gone most of the time, and every time she left, Mahiru would sit up at night and pray that she came back safely. With her gone, it was up to Mahiru to take care of her father. She complained about it, but truth be told, she’d never minded it that much. Now she thought she’d give anything just to go back to that.

Her mother had tried to show that people could smile, even in the darkest of times. That no matter how much despair there was, there was always hope as well. But Mahiru…the things she’d done as Ultimate Despair were…how could her mother ever forgive her? She had mocked her life’s work. She worked to capture despair on film and reproduce it for the world to see. She didn’t want smiles; she wanted misery.

And then her mother really had died in one of those war zones, and suddenly there weren’t any pictures of hope to combat her despair.

“I’m sorry,” Mahiru told the photo, even though her watering eyes made it nearly impossible to see it. “I’m so sorry.” Straightening up, she wiped her arm over her eyes and ran her hands through her hair. She wouldn’t let herself break down now. Everyone else was trying their best. That meant she would, too.

Her bathroom door opened, and Hiyoko peeked out. “Mahiru! Can you please help me with my kimono?”

“Oh course,” Mahiru smiled. The steamy air of the bathroom washed over her as she stepped inside. At least Hiyoko was bathing now. She hadn’t quite gotten the hang of tying her sash properly yet, but she’d made definite progress since the simulation. Mahiru shook her head affectionately.

“Okay, just like this. Look.” She took one end of the sash in each hand. “Like this, see?”
“Uh-huh.” Hiyoko watched her movements attentively. “Over, then under…then….”

“Haha.” Mahiru finished her knot and stepped back. “We have plenty of time to practice, so don’t feel like there’s any rush, okay?”

“Yay!” Hiyoko threw her arms out as if to embrace the world. “I love you, Mahiru!”

It must have been the heat of the bathroom that turned her cheeks red. She tried to conceal that with her hand. “You don’t have to…say such things.”

“Eh? But it’s true.” Hiyoko twirled, and her kimono moved with her. “Not like the others out there.”

Mahiru sighed. “Actually I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Mahiru adopted the same tone her mother used to use to scold her. She remembered one time, as a child, when she’d accidently spilled her milk all over one of her mother’s scrapbooks. Rather than yell or scream, her mother had simply cleaned up the milk and then sat down next to Mahiru and talked to her about not drinking or eating near her photographs.

“Look, Hiyoko, I don’t like the way you’ve been treating everyone since you recovered. You’ve done nothing but put people down.”

“Huh?” Hiyoko scowled. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Hiyoko.” Mahiru sighed. “Mikan killed me. And she was going to kill Ibuki too. That nasty woman was going to kill people! And it’s the same with Peko. She killed you! Her and that wannabe gangster killed you. And Teruteru killed Twogami, and that trashy puffball Nagito wanted it to happen. They’re all killers, and you want me to be nice to them? Kyahaha! That’s ridiculous!”

“Hiyoko.” Mahiru sighed. “Didn’t we kill people as Ultimate Despair?”

Hiyoko pursed her lips. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on. You think that’ll work on me?”

“WAAAAAAAHH!” Hiyoko burst into tears. “But we’re all like that, Mahiru! None of us deserve any of this.”

“Deserve?” The word flashed in her mind. She couldn’t focus on it. Something about it just felt wrong, like a blurry picture. “What do you mean? The Future Foundation found us and put us in the Neo World Program because they thought—”

“Yeah, well, they thought wrong,” Hiyoko snapped. “Killers don’t deserve a second chance. So none of us do.”

Realization slapped Mahiru across the face. “Hiyoko, are you saying…?” But her voice wouldn’t allow her to express the thought. Hiyoko wasn’t the same as she had been in the simulation. She wasn’t being cruel just to be cruel. She was doing it because she couldn’t forgive herself for what she’d done, for what everyone had done, and she was lashing out in the only way she knew how to
Without thinking, Mahiru pulled Hiyoko into a hug.

“Ma-Mahiru?”

“Listen to me, Hiyoko. It’s not like I’ve forgiven Fuyuhiko and Peko. I had a long talk with Fuyuhiko the day before you woke up, actually. But I don’t want revenge or anything like that. It’s wrong to think that way. I felt that way even before I became Ultimate Despair, and now, I feel it even more. If we keep blaming ourselves for what happened, we’ll never be able to move forward. We’ll never be able to do anything about it.”

Hiyoko sniffed. “Then what should I do?”

Mahiru stroked her hair. “Honestly, I don’t know. Thinking about it…really, it frightens me. But for a start, can you at least try to get along with the others here?”

“Even Mikan?”

Mahiru couldn’t help chuckling. “Even Mikan.” Lord knows the girl needed more confidence in herself. Mahiru wished she could help her. She’d been so busy feeling bad for herself and wondering what she could do, just like Hiyoko, that she hadn’t thought about how to help the others at all.

Hiyoko wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her kimono. “I don’t know.”

“Please,” Mahiru whispered. Hiyoko felt warm against her body. Behind that foul mouth and put-down attitude, she still felt like a child, even in that adult body. Mahiru wanted to hold her and keep her safe. She’d already failed to do that once. But now there wasn’t any Monokuma. No Monomi. None of that. It was just them. “At least try. For me?”

Hiyoko nodded into her chest. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Thank you.” She’d given in much more quickly than Mahiru had been expecting. Still. That was a good thing, wasn’t it? Mahiru let the embrace continue a few seconds longer before pulling back. “Now let’s go meet the others.”

“What?” Alarm danced across Hiyoko’s face. “Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“No fair, Mahiru!” Hiyoko pouted. “You promised me gummies.”

“Okay, okay.” Mahiru laughed. “We’ll go look for gummies first. Then we’ll go back to the hotel. Okay?”

Hiyoko nodded. “Okay. But only if I can hold your hand.”

“Of course.” As their hands met, Mahiru couldn’t help but think that maybe, just maybe, Hajime had been right. Maybe things would work out after all.

Number of Students: 15

Chapter End Notes
Yeah, I know the chapter's short, but I said it would be. I'm still working on Chapter 10. Hopefully it'll be up Friday or Saturday.

In the meantime, enjoy a bit of fluff between Mahiru and Hiyoko.

Thanks for reading! Really, you guys are the reason I do this. It makes me so happy to come on here and know that people are enjoying this story.
The ocean waves followed a predictable pattern as they toyed with the shoreline. In and out, in and out, trading places every few seconds. Guessing what would happen next was so easy that it was... well....

Boring?

You find everything boring, Izuru. I don’t understand it.

Of course you don’t. You are talentless. Average. Unremarkable. Boring.

You sound like Nagito.

He is boring too.

That caught Hajime’s attention. He could think of a number of words to describe Nagito. Boring was not one of them. What do you mean, Izuru?

Exactly what I said.

You only find things boring when you understand them. You only find people boring when you can predict exactly what they’ll do. Does that mean you understand Nagito? You know what he’s thinking?

The voice in his head went silent for a few minutes before responding with: He is less boring than the rest of you.

Huh. So even you can’t figure him out. Great.

Hajime stared at the ocean. If the most talented person in the world couldn’t do it, then he didn’t have a chance.

It doesn’t matter. He’ll be dead soon anyway.

Dead? What? What do you mean?

I can smell it. The stench of death clings to him. He should have died a long time ago.

But why? Why would he be dying? What’s wrong with him?

This is why you are boring.

Izuru did not sound amused. He stayed silent after that, and nothing Hajime said convinced him to reply. Fine then. Hajime would solve this without his help.

Logically, he could only think of one reason.

*Like I said before, my parents are dead. Since I had no other relatives, ‘it’ took direct action against me.*
It? What does “it” mean?

My diagnosis. Stage 3 malignant lymphoma, and to top it off…it’s accompanied by frontotemporal dementia.

When Nagito had told him about how his brain was literally deteriorating, about how he only had half a year to a year to live, about how he was frightened of dying alone, had he been telling the truth? But then, why say he’d read it all in a book? Why lie? When he’d first said that, Hajime had felt more than sympathy or pity. He’d been about to forgive Nagito. They could have tried to make a fresh start, like they had when they’d first gotten to the island. So why would he lie? Was he that afraid of being understood? Of being forgiven? It didn’t make sense.

Shaking his head to clear away his doubts, Hajime stood up. The phone should have charged by now, at least enough to make a call. He could deal with Nagito later. And it might be advantageous to talk to Mikan first. Maybe she could give him a better understanding of Nagito’s illness. Or if he even was ill at all. An image of Nagito in that blue hospital gown and suffering from the Despair Disease filled his vision. Hajime adjusted his tie. Why was he thinking about Nagito so much? I’m just a coward. I’m scared to leave someone like you alone when I don’t understand you at all. Was that really it?

When he walked into the hotel lobby, he was surprised to find his classmates already grouped up, standing in a rough circle near the receptionist’s desk. He guessed even Ultimates couldn’t form a perfect circle. “Hey,” he called. The tension in the room crushed his greeting instantly. “What happened?”

“How.” Peko watched him with stony eyes. “You were charging the phone here, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, it’s gone,” Fuyuhiko snapped. “Some bastard stole it.”

“What?” Hajime rushed forward. Sure enough, the phone had vanished. Yet the charger was still plugged into the wall. Why take the phone but leave the charger? No, he couldn’t worry about that now. “Who took it? Why is it gone?” He realized he’d been shouting when he saw the looks on their faces, and he made an effort to restrain himself. “What happened?”

“The young master and I were in the restaurant,” Peko recounted. “As were Sonia, Twogami, and Gundham. Teruteru joined us shortly after you left.” Hajime nodded; he could verify that much. And since Teruteru had entered the restaurant directly instead of going through the lobby, he wouldn’t have known about the phone. “None of us left the restaurant until a minute ago, when we heard Nekomaru shout.”

“THAT’S RIGHT,” the hulking man roared, evidently needing no further invitation. “Akane and I were training in the Old Building. We’d planned to go to the beach, but Nagito was there, and we didn’t want to accidently hurt him.”

“How?” Akane gaped lifelessly; Hajime wished she would close her mouth before something flew into it. “Nagito was there?”

“That,” Fuyuhiko crossed his arms. “He probably left to steal the phone after you saw him.”

“He didn’t,” Hajime said shortly.

“Anyway,” Mahiru jumped in, “Hiyoko and I were in my cottage for a bit. Then we went to the market, where we meet Kazuichi.”
“He was building some weird robot arm,” Hiyoko said. Surprisingly, she didn’t add a snide follow-up.

“The three of us came here together,” Mahiru continued. “We ran into Akane and Nekomaru exiting the Old Building. So I guess we can verify their account. We all headed into the lobby together. Nekomaru noticed the empty charger, and he reacted. Loudly.”

“Okay then,” Fuyuhiko smirked. “So everyone here has an alibi.”

An involuntary shiver ran across Hajime’s body, but before he could say anything, Sonia spoke. “Do not say it like that, Fuyuhiko. Not after everything that has happened.”

“What?” Fuyuhiko shook his head. “ Haven’t you learned anything from that simulation? No good can come from sugar-coating. The only way we can move forward is by facing the truth.”

The sound of muffled clapping halted their conversation. Nagito stood in the doorway. “You Ultimates are banding together to search for the truth! Ah, how wonderful! By the way, what is this truth you’re seeking? Was someone murdered again?” His choice of words, or maybe the way he said them, infuriated Hajime. “ Huh? Why does everyone look so upset?” It was like Nagito wasn’t even aware of what he’d said.

“You fiend,” Gundham said. “Surely you’ve heard that the Demon King’s telepathy has been silenced?”

Nagito tilted his head. “Um… I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He’s saying our phone was stolen,” Hiyoko chimed in. She was acting more like the Hiyoko who’d forgiven Fuyuhiko. Hajime glanced at Mahiru.

“Phone?” Nagito glanced at his glove. “No one told me we had a phone.”

“You mean you didn’t know about it?” Fuyuhiko sounded incredulous.

“Heyyyyy,” Ibuki said. “ Don’t forget about Ibuki! I went looking for Mikan-chan, but I couldn’t find her anywhere. I even went to the library. Kyah! Ibuki never goes to libraries.”

“So Mikan’s the only one without an… excuse?” Fuyuhiko asked.

“Hang on,” Nagito said. “I still don’t really get what happened. If you explain it to me, I might be able to help.”

“I somehow doubt that,” Fuyuhiko growled.

“Indeed,” Peko said. “None of us trust you.”

“Ahaa.” Nagito did that thing where he looked at his hand and thought about the world. “Maybe I was being too conceited, thinking someone like me would have anything worth offering. I understand your feelings, but I hardly think a missing phone poses a good enough trial to give you hope.”

“Now, now,” Sonia tried to smile. “We should not fight.” She explained everyone’s accounts to Nagito.

“I see,” he said once she finished. “Thank you. That was a clear and concise explanation. Just as expected from the Ultimate Princess!”
“So,” Kazuichi hissed, “did you want to say anything useful?”

“Hmm.” Nagito raised his gloved hand to his face only to lower it again. “You’re right, Kuzuryu-kun. Tsumiki-kun definitely looks suspicious.” His voice didn’t change, but just for a second, Hajime could swear Nagito’s lips curled when he mentioned Tsumiki’s name. “But what about Hinata-kun?”

“Huh?” He didn’t like the way Nagito looked at him.

“It sounds like you had a chance to take the phone. Or to never charge it at all. After all, you were the only one in the lobby before you left to meet Hanamura-kun.”

“So Hajime took the phone?” Kazuichi asked.

“O-Of course not!” Hajime nearly spat. After what Kazuichi had just told him in the marketplace, this was what he did? “Why would I?” He rounded on Nagito. “This is all your fault.” He should have known better than to trust him. He was crazy. Simple as that.

“Don’t get mad.” Nagito raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “Of course you don’t have a reason to take it, Hinata-kun, not unless you wanted to keep a secret from the rest of us.”

“A secret, you say?” Gundham glanced at Hajime with renewed interest. “What dark art have you learned?”

Hajime didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He couldn’t do anything except stare at Nagito. Everything else faded to white noise. Nagito knew. He definitely knew. But how? How had he found out? Only the survivors of the killing school trip should know the truth. The others might know Izuru Kamukura, but even with their memories restored, none of them had met Hajime, so none of them should know that they were the same person.

Granted, Nagito had encountered Kamukura several times before Jabberwock Island, but he’d never met him as Hajime, had he? He didn’t know for sure, and Izuru remained silent. If this came out now, in this way, the others would take it badly. They would think he’d been lying to them, or that he didn’t trust them, and they would mistrust him in turn. There were already enough problems on the island without that happening.

“If I’d wanted to take the phone, I wouldn’t have told you guys about it in the first place.”

“Makes sense to me,” Akane shrugged. Yeah, of course it did. She probably hadn’t been listening to begin with. A moment later, Akane confirmed that thought when she said, “So, anyway, I don’t really get it, but all we hafta do is find Mikan, right?”

“Yeah,” Hiyoko said. Hajime waited, but that was it. No insults or threats. He was pleasantly surprised. Whatever Mahiru had said, it seemed to be working. She had always seemed level-headed, and she was really good at taking care of others. He wondered how the simulation would have changed if she’d survived longer.

“Hold it!” Fuyuhiko called.

“Indeed,” Peko added, as if she’d read his mind. Which, considering how long they’d known each other, wasn’t impossible. “Everyone should turn out their pockets. Now. That way, we won’t have to suspect each other.”

“An excellent suggestion,” Twogami nodded. “Hajime, you should take note.”
“Excuse me,” Nagito said quietly, “but I’ve noticed something strange. Is it okay with everyone if I say it?”

Hajime bit back his impulsive ‘no.’ Akane, lacking tact, did not.

“Now, now, Akane,” Sonia soothed. ‘We should at least listen to what he has to say.”

“Should we?” Teruteru spoke for the first time. He moved further from the others, and Hajime noted he was deliberately putting more distance between himself and Nagito. At least three pods worth. “It’s probably better for us if he doesn’t talk.”

“It’s better for us if he’s tied up,” Fuyuhiko snapped. If Hajime hadn’t been looking at Nagito, he would have missed it. But since he was, he caught the flicker of fear that fled across his face at Fuyuhiko’s suggestion. “He just tried to derail the conversation the moment we mentioned searching people. He’s hiding something.”

Nagito smiled. One of his fake ones. “Would you like to search me, Kuzuryu-kun? I don’t mind.”

Fuyuhiko nodded at Peko, and she approached Nagito. “Forgive me,” she muttered before she began patting him down.

Nagito’s false smile grew. “Not at all, Pekoyama-kun! You should never have to apologize to trash like—”

“What did you want to say earlier?” Hajime interrupted.

“Ahh.” Nagito’s expression turned contemplative, but his eyes didn’t move from Hajime. “Well, I just noticed that it might be too early to blame Tsumiki-kun.” Now his gaze left Hajime. “There’s still someone with an insufficient alibi.” Hajime grit his teeth. Nagito was teasing him, bringing up the threat of exposure without actually saying it. He needed to tell the others soon.

Mahiru frowned. “Who?”

Nagito chuckled. “Surely you heard what everyone said. If you were listening, it’s quite clear.”

“Enough with your riddles!” Akane cracked her knuckles. “If you don’t tell us right now, I’m seriously gonna punch ya!”

Peko straightened up and stepped back. “He’s clean.”

“Clean?” Nagito turned to her. “Was that a compliment?”

“Like hell,” Fuyuhiko interjected. “It just means you don’t have the phone on you. But I’m still watching you, bastard.”

“You? Watch me?” Nagito grinned. “I’ll try not to bore you.”

“Enough!” Hajime had almost forgotten just how easily everyone got distracted. Once again, he wished Chiaki were here. Knowing Nagito, he must have left a clue about the person he suspected in his words. Hajime dove through everyone’s stories again.

Peko, Fuyuhiko, Twogami, Sonia, Gundham, and Teruteru had been in the restaurant the whole time. None of them had left. Mahiru and Hiyoko were in a cottage. Then they’d met Kazuichi at the market. They all left together and encountered Akane and Nekomaru, who had been training in the Old Building. That meant Hajime had encountered Kazuichi before them, which meant
Kazuichi likely wouldn’t have had time to run to the hotel, grab the phone, and run back. He hadn’t even known about it in the first place. Akane and Nekomaru had seen Nagito at the beach before Hajime, so he had the same excuse as Kazuichi. Mikan was missing, and Ibuki had been searching for her.

Oh. Oh. Oh!

“Ibuki,” Hajime said, “you were searching Mikan on your own, right?”

“Amazing!” Nagito cried. “Amazing, Hinata-kun! To think you actually noticed such—”

“Blub-blub-blub,” Ibuki nearly foamed at the mouth. “Hajime-chan, Ibuki-chan didn’t even know there was a phone.” So apparently she didn’t just use the honorifics with other people’s first names. She even did it with her own. Somehow, Hajime wasn’t surprised.

“That is true,” Twogami said slowly.

“Neither did Mikan,” Hajime realized. “But those are the only two who could have taken it.”

“For what reason would either of them risk incurring the Demon King’s wrath?” Questioned Gundham.

“Why don’t we find Mikan first and deal with the rest of this shit afterward?” Fuyuhiko suggested. One by one, everyone nodded. “Great. Some of us will stay here and keep an eye on Ibuki. Just in case.” That last bit sounded almost apologetic. Ibuki nodded sadly.

“Okay,” Hajime said. “Mahiru, Sonia, Nekomaru, and I will split up and look for Mikan. Whoever finds her should bring her back here. How does that sound?” He’d tried to choose people Mikan would be at least somewhat comfortable with. At the least, none of them would frighten her. Hopefully. When no one objected, Hajime forced himself to smile. “Great. Then let’s go.”

Mahiru agreed to search the first island, and Sonia agreed to take the central one, so Nekomaru and Hajime crossed the bridge to the second.

“Mhm!” Nekomaru nodded approvingly. “This brings back memories. That’s the beach where Akane and I first sparred. Well, I guess it wasn’t the first time, but we thought it was.”

It was also the same beach where Mahiru had been murdered. Hajime pushed the morbid thought aside. Thinking that way wouldn’t help anyone. “Hey, Nekomaru. How are you holding up?”

The big man laughed. “Hajime, you shouldn’t worry about me. If anything, I should be asking you.”

Hajime sighed. “How are things between you and Gundham?” He wished he knew a better way to ask that, but his brain never seemed to cooperate.

“Gyahahaha!” Nekomaru’s voice startled a nearby seagull. Hajime watched it fly off. “We’re men who made an arrangement. I lost fair and square. I couldn’t possibly be mad about that. If I was, I would be betraying everyone I’ve ever coached.”

Huh? “What do you mean, fair and square? Didn’t one of his hamsters press your…uh, Goodnight Button?”

“Yes. What of it? One should use all his assets to win. To WIN, DO YOU HEAR?”
“Yes, okay, please stop shouting.” He didn’t really get it. Well, maybe a little. It seemed to be a matter of pride. He could at least understand that. Even so, that was a pretty extreme way to show it. Then again, extreme described both Nekomaru and Gundham pretty well. And if they really didn’t harbor any grudges, then that made things easier. Everyone recovering had been a miracle, but since then, or maybe even earlier, a suffocating tension boiled in the hot island air. The worst part was that Hajime didn’t know how to fix it. He hadn’t realized it before, but that might have been why the loss of the phone upset him so much. Hearing from Naegi-kun and the others would have been a way for them to take responsibility rather than him.

“Hey, Nekomaru.” He stopped just outside the diner’s parking lot. Nekomaru, who had already begun heading for the beach house, glanced back. “What do you think about…well, everything?”

“Hajime.” Even when he lowered his voice, Nekomaru still sounded louder than a freight train. Or Ibuki during a performance. “I know how you feel. As a manager, that’s part of my job. I know how frightening leadership is. It’s a big responsibility, and you have a lot of people depending on you.” Surprisingly, none of this helped. Quite the opposite, actually. “Hajime, the reason everyone is trying their best is because of you. As leader, that means you have to try your best for them.”

“I know that.” Hajime couldn’t shake a strange sense of loneliness as he stared out at the sea. “I don’t know how.”

“Hmm. It sounds like you’re afraid of leading because you’re afraid of making a mistake. Listen to me! That’s no way to live.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean; you should never let the fear of failure stop you from trying. That’s no way to live.” He laughed extremely loudly. “You should tackle the challenge head-on! Yes, you will fail sometimes. And when you do, the rest of us will be here for you. Because we believe in you. Akane told me all about what happened at the last trial. You beat some huge girl! It sounds like you were amazing! Gyahahaha! So, anyway, that’s why I believe you can do it.”

“Thank you.” Hajime didn’t trust himself to say any more. Not without crying, and he refused to do that.

“So.” Nekomaru rolled his neck. “I know what’ll make you feel better. Want me to do ‘it’ to you?”

Hajime nearly jumped. “Um…why don’t we keep looking for Mikan?”

“Mmm. A fine plan. Then I will check the beach house.” Hajime watched Nekomaru walk away. The Ultimate Team Manager was right. He couldn’t keep allowing his fear to hold him back. Taking a deep breath, Hajime proceeded to the pharmacy.

He hadn’t actually gotten to see it last time. Not from the inside. It reflected the same sorry state as the airport and ranch. The shelves held a barren emptiness; he couldn’t help thinking of dead trees in winter. But he couldn’t focus on that. Quiet sobs came from the corner. He’d found Mikan.

She sat against the wall, knees to her chest, face buried in her arms. Hajime swallowed his hesitation and moved to sit next to her. He remained ready to spring up at a moment’s notice, but when she didn’t move, he gently laid a hand on her shoulder. She flinched, but only slightly.

“You know,” Hajime said, “we all missed you at breakfast. You’d have probably thought Teruteru did a good job with it, since it was…nutritional. More so than Ibuki’s fried rice with gravy, anyway.” He didn’t know why that particular example sprang to mind. Maybe because Ibuki had a
way of saying or doing things that stuck with you? Anyway. “We all got kind of worried.” He tried rubbing her back, the way he’d seen people do in movies when they wanted to calm someone down. It felt awkward as hell. “I mean, no one knew where you were. Mikan, have you even been on the first island today?”

She shook her head without looking up.

“Not even to go to the hotel?” She shook her head again. Hajime sat there and did his best not to blush. He felt stupid. Not just because he didn’t know what to do — sadly, that feeling was growing more and more familiar — but because he didn’t even know what he wanted to do. If Mikan was still in despair, he’d been a complete idiot to sit next to her alone like this. He was probably stronger than her, but if she had a razor, she could—ugh! How could he still feel this way about her? Wasn’t sending her to her death once enough? He’d been doing his best to deal with Nagito. So why couldn’t he do the same for Mikan?

He lost his battle not to blush. Naegi wouldn’t have even thought about abandoning Mikan. The idea would never have entered his head. Naegi would be doing everything he could to help her. So why couldn’t he?

“I’m sorry.” For a second, he thought she’d spoken, even though it had been his mouth that moved.

At that, Mikan lifted her head. Her eyelashes rose like the opening of a dam. “H-H-H-Hinata-kun?” At that moment, she looked more like a lost child than Hiyoko ever had. “W-why are you a-apologizing?”

“I guess….” Hajime looked at the ceiling for inspiration. Nothing. “I haven’t treated you fairly, Mikan. Ever since we agreed to stay on Jabberwock Island, everyone’s been trying to help each other accept what we did in the past and try to move forward. But no one’s been there for you. No one’s tried to help you. If anything, they’ve been—no, we’ve been treating you even worse than before.”

“No. Not, hic, worse. I-I’m fine with that.” Hearing her say that yanked on Hajime’s heart. How could she—and Nagito, for that matter—be so okay with putting themselves down all the time? He’d never let someone do that him. “It’s being, hic, ignored. Everyone h-hates me s-s-so much that they won’t even u-use me.”

“No, no, Mikan. It’s not like that. Everyone’s just scared. No one knows what to do. But we’re all trying.” Standing up, he offered her his hand. “Everyone’s trying their best right now. So…will you please come back to the hotel with me?”

Mikan hiccupped a few more times and wiped her eyes on her apron, which was probably better than using her bandages again. “You’re so kind, Hinata-kun.” I’m really not, he thought to himself. “But they’re r-right. I m-m-mean, the things we did were—”

“Mikan,” Hajime interrupted, “it doesn’t matter what you’ve done.” Actually it did, a lot, but he ignored that. “What matters is what you’re going to do. I won’t lie. It’ll be difficult. It may be the most difficult thing you ever do. But you won’t be alone. We’ll all support you. We’ll all do our best because that’s the future we chose. So come with me. Please.”


“Hey.” Hajime tried to sound cheerful. “Come on. The others are waiting for us.”
They began the journey back in silence. Hajime hoped she would use the time to compose herself. What would happen when they got back wouldn’t be pretty. “Mikan, you’re sure you didn’t go to the hotel today, right?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded. “I’ve been in the pharmacy since early this m-morning. The smell of all the medicines is comforting.” Okay then. He definitely disagreed. Mikan giggled softly to herself but didn’t elaborate. It was a step up from crying.

“Hey, Mikan. What do you know about,” and he paused for a moment to search for the name, “stage 3 malignant lymphoma and frontotemporal dementia?”

“W-well,” Mikan fidgeted with her bandage, “malignant lymphoma is a cancer. It’s in the body’s lymphatic system, which is essentially a part of our immune system. Being malignant means it has the ability to spread throughout the body. If it’s stage 3, that means the lymph nodes on both sides of the diaphragm are infected, but it hasn’t spread through the rest of the body yet. It’s actually not that difficult to treat.”

Hajime mulled over the medical explanation. “So it weakens the immune system?”

“Well, yes. It also swells your lymph nodes, and it can result in a variety of other symptoms, like coughing, fevers, or weight loss.” Nagito had never looked like a paragon of health, and he had been hit by the Despair Disease much harder than the others. It sounded pretty bad, but if it was treatable, then it had nothing to do with what Nagito had said about dying.

“What about the frontotemporal dementia?”

“H-Hinata-kun? You don’t think you’re sick, do you?”

“What? No! No, of course not!” The expression on Mikan’s face compelled him to keep saying no until she burst into tears again.

“I-I-I’m sorry!” She moaned. “I didn’t m-mean t-to assume.”

They stopped right before the bridge to the central island. Hajime, taking a deep breath, smiled. “No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped. It’s my fault. Really. I was just…curious.”

“O-okay,” she mumbled. “Frontotemporal dementia is a disease where you lose the nerve cells in your brain’s frontal lobe. There are a couple of different types. Do you know which one you’re looking for?”

“Well, behavioral-variant frontotemporal dementia, also called bvFTD, might do that. There’s no cure for any type of FTD. Most people who are diagnosed are already in their forties or fifties though, so you’d have to be really unlucky to get it earlier. Anyway, bvFTD has a number of symptoms, like poor impulse control, obsessive or compulsive behavior, a lack of social awareness or appropriate behavior, and a loss of empathy.”

Mikan kept explaining, but Hajime’s mind jammed with all this new information. A lot of these symptoms explained Nagito’s behavior. Which would mean…what he had told him was true? Hajime thought and thought. His penchant for saying inappropriate things at inconvenient moments. With that in mind, it made sense why he told Hajime not to take everything he said so seriously. A loss of empathy…could that and his cycle of luck explain why he never seemed too upset over losing his classmates? Now that Hajime really thought about, Nagito had always said he
felt upset or saddened, but then he would immediately go into another speech about hope. Was that because of the disease too? Or had he always been like that? Regardless, it didn’t excuse any of his actions, even if it did excuse the way he talked. And yet Hajime could clearly remember a time when he’d been about to forgive Nagito, only for the other to say it had all been a lie. Why did he lie about that?

“H-Hinata-kun?” Hearing his name dragged him back to the present. Mikan looked like she was about to cry. “I’m sorry for talking so much!”

“No, it’s fine.” He brushed his hair back and smiled. “I asked, didn’t I? Thank you.”

She looked like she was about to say something else, but before she could, a booming voice distracted them. “THERE YOU ARE!”

Nekomaru ran up to them just as they set foot on the central island. “I see you found Mikan!”

“Nidai-kun,” Mikan said, “you shouldn’t push yourself so hard. You’ve only just recovered, and —”

“Gyahahah!” Nekomaru waved away her warning. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.” Moving over to Hajime, he lowered his voice to a whisper. Unlike before, he actually succeeded in being quiet. Hajime would have thought it impossible. “So?”

“We’ll see,” he whispered back.

“Mhm.” Nekomaru rubbed his hands together. “Alright then! Let’s go!”

The three of them reached the first island without further incident. They entered the gates to the hotel, but just as they were about to head into the lobby, Fuyuhiko’s voice rang out from within.

“So it was you, you son of a bitch!”

Number of Students: 15

Chapter End Notes

Over 2,000 hits. I'm speechless, guys. Thank you! Thank you all so much!

So for the next chapter, I admit, I'm a bit worried. It may be the loosest in terms of canon compliance. It doesn't go against anything in the established canon (as far as I know). Essentially, it's a Nagito POV, and it features a flashback of when the Remnants of Despair got taken in by the Future Foundation. I'll talk a lot more about it when I post it, but this is just a head's up.

Anyway. Thank you, thank you, thank you for your continued interest in this story! Please let me know your thoughts in the comments. Is there anything you like? Anything I could work on? Anything you want to see in the future? We still have a long way to go, my friends.
Ducking out of the lobby, Nagito retreated to his cottage. Once inside, he locked the door and waited a few minutes. Nobody followed. Well, of course not. None of them really wanted to see him. That was understandable.

Reaching under his pillow, Nagito pulled out the phone. It didn’t have much battery life left, but it would suffice. After leaving the beach, he had gone to the lobby on a whim and happened across the phone. So this was his first act of good luck, huh?

After that, it had been a simple matter to hide the phone in his cottage and wait a few minutes before returning to the lobby. With the others searching for Tsumiki-kun or guarding Mioda-kun in the restaurant, returning the phone should be easy too. As long as he was quick, there wouldn’t be a problem.

He weighed the phone. It felt heavy in his hand. He hadn’t held one in a long time. It wasn’t like there was anyone who would want to call him. He used to listen to music on a device like this one, but it broke when he fell down a flight of stairs one time. After that, he stuck to the ones like the one he’d used in the warehouse.

Only one number had been saved into the phone’s contacts. That seemed like poor planning, but the sight of that name destroyed his doubts. Makoto Naegi. The Ultimate Hope. Nagito could scarcely contain the excitement spreading through his body. Swallowing, he selected the number. All he had to do was push the button. After all this time, he could finally hear the Ultimate Hope speak again. He really was lucky! The last time they’d met…well, Nagito didn’t know how to put it. Even though he’d been in despair at the time, those memories shone above all the others.

. . . . . .

“They’ll be here any moment,” Souda-kun hissed. “Is everyone ready?”

“Indeed,” Koizumi-kun affirmed. “Teruteru’s in another room by himself. Fuyuhiko and Peko should be down on the first floor. The Ultimate Imposter is by the main gates, so he’ll be found first. It’s up to him to get the others to come here.”

“Yeah!” Akane bumped her fist against her other palm. “I just gotta beat ‘em up, right?”

“No.” Nekomaru reminded her for the fourth time. “Just come on. We can’t all be in here. It’ll be too suspicious.” He grabbed her wrist.

“Good luck, Nidai-kun! Owari-kun!” Nagito waved politely. The prospect of wishing them luck amused him.


“Don’t actually leave the school,” Koizumi-kun warned. “We do want them to find us.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Owari-kun actually stuck a finger in her ear. “We know the plan.”

“Still.” Nevermind-san’s face sparkled with excitement. “It is great to be reunited with everyone
after all this time. Gundham especially. I am glad to see you looking well.”

“Fuhahaha! For one such as I, chaos is but another form of sustenance.”

“What about me, Miss Sonia?” Souda-kun leaned toward her. “Did you miss me?”

“Of course,” she smiled.

Nagito pulled a chair over to the window. It was amazing how much and how little things had changed since that fateful day. The gutted carcass of the school lay sprawled before him. Aged bloodstains adorned the cobblestones below. There used to be grass and vines and even a few trees, but everything had long died. Despair stained the earth like a black poison. Nothing would ever grow there again.

And yet, the school’s corpse held a magnetizing beauty, even in death. Nagito absently ran his finger over the glass. If he closed his eyes, he could almost hear the flames popping, not crackling, popping, like balloons. The smoke, a little like all the toast he’d ever burned, only stronger, clutched his nose and clawed through his hair.

“Komaeda-kun,” the Ultimate Princess shattered the memory. “Please do not look so glum. We are happy to have you here too.”

Before he could question the use of the word glum, Mioda-kun threw her arm around his shoulders. “That’s right! Nagito-chan, Ibuki hasn’t seen you in decades. No, centuries! Kyaah! Ibuki-chan said centuries! What a word!”

“Humph.” Saionji-kun slid open the door. “Come on, Mahiru. Let’s go wander the hallways until they find us. I’ll cry and everything.”

“Okay.” Koizumi-kun followed her into the hallway. There she paused and looked back. “I’d love to take a picture to commemorate our reunion, but with Akane, Nekomaru, Teruteru, The Ultimate Imposter, Fuyuhiko, and Peko already waiting elsewhere, I guess it wouldn’t work, huh? But that’s okay. We’ll all meet again in the Future Foundation. Maybe we’ll even get to see Yukizome-sensei!” Her cheeks flushed with excitement. “Really, I know I’ve called some of you unreliable before, but being with all of you again like this makes me so happy.” She looked directly at Nagito. “Yes, Komaeda-kun, all of you includes you. I’m really happy to see you too. So cheer up.” She smiled and slid the door shut.

“You hear that?” Mioda-kun ran a hand through Nagito’s hair. “We’ve all missed yo—WHOA! Your hair is so soft!”

“Eh? R-really?” Tsumiki-kun moved to stand next to Mioda-kun. She didn’t ask to feel it, as she once would have done. “Oh! You’re right.”

“Guys,” Nagito protested, but it was more out of custom than a genuine desire for them to stop. No one had ever touched him like this, no one but her. He had no idea it would feel this good.

“Tch! You sure are lucky, Nagito.” Souda-kun winked. “I’ve dyed my hair too many times to let just anyone touch it.”

“But you all aren’t just anyone,” Nagito said softly. “You’re all amazing.”

“We,” Nevermind-san corrected gently, in the same way Yukizome-sensei used to do. “We are all amazing. Never forget that you are one of us, Nagito.”
Looking around at everyone’s bright, welcoming faces was too much for him. His cheeks warmed as he pressed his forehead against the glass. Everyone was being so kind. And he felt that way about all of them. They loved him. He loved them. He loved them, he loved them. He…loved them? Huh? How could he love them? Shouldn’t it be the opposite? No, maybe not. It didn’t matter what he did. Hope would win in the end. Hope would always win. So…this was okay, right? Since hope would win anyway…it was okay for him to enjoy this, right?

“Look!” Mioda-kun stepped away and pointed out the window. “I see them. Ibuki sees them!” Nagito stared. Sure enough, he saw a group of people spreading through the courtyard. He couldn’t identify any of them from here, but even knowing that the Future Foundation had arrived got his heart racing.

“Okay, okay.” Souda-kun got to his feet. “I’m going to go ‘accidently’ run into our rescuers. Remember our story, guys. After witnessing the broadcast of the Killing School Life, we made our way back here. We were traveling from all over the world, so it too us a while to get here. By the time we arrived, the game had been long over.” Nodding to himself, he left the room.

“Ahhh.” Nagito looked at his glove. He still couldn’t get the fingers to bend properly. Well, that was to be expected. “I don’t like lying, especially when the lie’s that weak.”

“We do want them to find out, remember?” Nevermind-san said. “Just not right away. We need enough time for the load up.” Ah, she meant the upload. Still, they’d find out rather quickly. After all, Munakata-san had battled Pekoyama-kun and seen Kuzuryu-kun in person, and Kimura-san had surely seen Tsumiki-kun’s face. There was no way those three would be able to hide for long.

“Indeed,” Tanaka-kun redid his scarf. As he wrapped it around his neck, Nagito noticed that his Dark Devas of Destruction were missing. That was a shame. After what happened to Lucky, Nagito didn’t allow himself to have any pets. They deserved a better life with a better owner. Looking at Tanaka-kun caused a strange ache to resonate through his chest, so he focused on the floor instead.

“Everyone,” Tsumiki-kun grinned, “we’re about to make Junko so happy!” The name buzzed in Nagito’s ear. “Though if what she said about the Neo World Program is true, none of us will remember her.”

“Remember,” Nevermind-san cut in, “we need to alert the survivors of the Killing School Life without alerting the Future Foundation.”

“If they found out first, they’d kill us,” Tsumiki-kun said without crying. “That would ruin Junko’s plan.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Nagito smiled. “Leave it to me. I can do it in a single sentence.” And he would too. So that the battle between hope and despair would go as it should. But while his classmates and Junko supported Despair, Nagito knew which side would emerge triumphant. The result had already been determined. All that was left now was the battle itself.

“I salute your courage,” Tanaka-kun said.

“Now, everyone!” Nevermind-san flexed, grabbing her muscle with her free hand. “It has been a pleasure working with you. Let us all do our best!”

It took the Future Foundation nearly half an hour to find them. Considering that they’d been the ones who called the Future Foundation and told them that they were at Hope’s Peak Academy, and that they’d seen their soldiers in the courtyard a few minutes ago, Nagito wondered if the delay
was due to sloppiness or caution. Either way, it did not speak well of their efficiency. When the
door finally opened, Nagito looked at it expectantly. His smile died. Makoto Naegi was not there.
Instead he saw—

“Sensei!” Mioda-kun ran over to her. “Is it really you?”

Yukizome-sensei stepped into the classroom. A hulking beast of a man—Sakakura-san, right?—stood behind her. Two more Future Foundation agents waited in the hall. “Everyone.” The gentle
smile on the face of class 77’s former teacher radiated comfort. “I’m so glad to see you. I’d been so
worried. So much has happened in the world. And then when we got the call saying you were here
– I simply had to come, no matter what.”

“Sensei!” Tsumiki-kun wept so much that she could have replaced the fountain in the courtyard.
Yukizome-sensei went around hugging each of them in turn. Nagito accepted her gesture with a
certain stiffness. He could tell it was empty.

“Okay, okay.” Sakakura-san cracked his knuckles. “Can we go? This whole thing feels like a trap.
I don’t want to stay here any longer than necessary.”

“Wait!” The Ultimate Princess threw out her hand. “What about our friends? We got separated, and
—”

“Don’t worry,” Yukizome-sensei smiled. “We’ve already rescued them.”

“Kyaah!” Mioda-kun screeched. “You guys sure are amazing!”

“It’s all thanks to Munakata,” Yukizome-sensei beamed. “Now, let’s get you guys out of here.”

“About time,” Sakakura-san grunted. He stepped out, and one by one, the Remnants of Despair
followed.

As Nagito was about to do the same, his ex-teacher pulled him into another hug. “Makoto Naegi
and Kyoko Kirigiri are on the left side near the courtyard as you exit.”

He suddenly felt very hot. The urge to remove his coat itched nearly as badly as the flesh between
his arm and her hand. “How did you know it would be me?”

She laughed lightly, and her breath tickled his ear. “Who else would it be?” He was seized by a
sudden impulse to shove her away, to bash her head against the wall, but she’d already released
him. With a short nod, he followed after his classmates. Empty window frames, cracked tiles, and
gaping holes in the walls and floor stalked him as he wandered through Hope’s Peak Academy.
Everything had begun here once. It seemed only fitting it should do so again.

As they stepped outside, Nagito immediately ran his gaze over everyone on his left side. His heart
took off like a car. It was really him. It was really him.

His feet moved before his mind. That was a rare occurrence, but he had no time to appreciate it.
The Ultimate Hope grew closer and closer until he could reach out and touch him. He did so. His
hand felt so warm in-between his own, but not in a burning way like Yukizome-sensei’s. Its
warmth even seeped through the glove, and he imagined Junko’s hand screaming as it melted
away to nothing.

“Naegi-sama,” he breathed. “Ah, how wonderful! How beautiful!” The younger boy’s face was a
portrait of confusion. That wrinkled brow, the hitch in his breath, those wide eyes, the tremble in
his fingers—and yet he didn’t pull away. Neither one moved. Nagito drank in every aspect of his
being, from the bit of hair standing straight up on his head to the color of the shoes—sneakers, actually—that clashed with his suit. The other’s warmth filled his body. He needed this. If he let go, he would die. He knew he would die. “It’s so great to see you again.”

That was as far as he got before something slammed into him from behind. His chin banged against the ground, rattling him. A heavy pressure dug into his back. It felt like a knee. A pair of hands pinned his own to the ground. The glove slid, and Nagito’s heart skipped a beat. If it came off now, everything would be ruined.

“Let him up!” A voice said. Nagito shook his wrist in an effort to fix the glove. The grip on his arm tightened.

“He was trying to attack you.”

“He wasn’t!” That first voice sang in his ears like a lullaby. Nagito shivered.

“Even if he was,” added a female voice, “he had plenty of time to do so before you acted.” Whoever was on top of him cursed. Nagito tilted his head. The woman’s voice had been Kirigiri-san’s. The Ultimate Detective’s. How magnificent she had been!

“Please, let him up,” hummed the first voice. “You’re hurting him!” Ah! For the Ultimate Hope to express such concern for a contemptible creature of despair! His face burned. The weight eased and then disappeared entirely. Even so, he couldn’t move. The shoes he’d marked earlier could, and they stepped into his field of vision. “Hey.” Nagito didn’t let himself look up. “Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

When he stayed quiet, the shoes stepped back, and knees took their place. The thought of making the Ultimate Hope kneel to help him overwhelmed Nagito, and he sat up. The smile on the other’s face outshone the sun. “I’m glad you’re okay. I’m sorry about that. Some of us are still on edge. I’m sure it must be the same with you guys too, right? But don’t worry. You’re safe now.”

This perfect, smiling boy had defeated Junko Enoshima. Where Nagito had failed, he succeeded. He’d overcome Ultimate Despair. Nagito desperately wanted to touch him again, to reassure himself that this was real, that he could actually be this lucky. What bad luck would result from this?

“Excuse me.” Kirigiri-san’s voice drew his attention. She stood over him. Cold, impassive—she was exactly like he’d imagined from the broadcast. “This may be rude, but why are you wearing only one glove?”

Nagito hadn’t even realized he’d been fidgeting with it until she’d asked. He couldn’t hide it now. That would draw too much attention. But he couldn’t reveal it either. Everything would be over before it had even begun. This was for hope. For hope, for hope, for hope, for hope, for hope for hopeforhopeforhopeforhopefor—

Stop lying to yourself. You just want to be the one to kill her this time.

No. No!

Only the sound of the Ultimate Hope’s voice prevented him from breaking down. “Kyoko! I’m surprised you of all people would ask that.”

“We should go,” said the person who’d tackled Nagito. “We don’t want to be out here too long.”

“Alright. Okay.” The brunet placed a hand on Nagito’s shoulder. “We’ll talk later, okay?” He stood
and started walking away. Kirigiri-san followed.

Nagito took a deep breath. “Naegi-sama!” The Ultimate Hope turned back, mouth open as if he wanted to say something, but Nagito’s nervous energy pushed him onward. “You’re even prettier than your sister.” The other’s mouth dropped even wider. Nagito, realizing what he’d just said, fled. He didn’t stop, even when he heard his name being called. Even though he’d only just started running, his lungs screamed for relief, and one arm flailed uselessly by his side. His calves threatened to sever themselves from his body. Still, he refused to stop, not until he’d reached the helicopter where Yukizome-sensei and the others were waiting.

“Did he get the message?” She asked him.

He couldn’t speak for panting too hard, so he nodded. Now all they had to do was wait for the Ultimate Hope to talk to his sister or Fukawa-san. From there, he and Kirigiri-san should be able to piece the rest together. So why had he said pretty? It was just his hope. It must have been. His sister had had the potential to unleash an even greater hope, and she’d wasted it. That was all it was. It had to be.

. . . . . . .

Back in his cottage, Nagito hesitated. The last time he’d spoken to Naegi-sama had been… unpleasant. If the others learned what he was doing, they would – no, this was silly. Nagito pushed the button.

The ringing the phone made was more suited to the bells of a cathedral. Nagito held his free hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter. He couldn’t lose himself in this moment. He needed to concentrate.

The voice on the other end paused his heart. “Hello? Hinata-kun? Hinata-kun, is that you?”

“Naegi-sama,” he whispered.

A brief silence. Then, “Komaeda-kun?”

“You remembered!” Nagito’s eyes watered. “You remembered me, Naegi-sama!”

“Sama? You don’t… just call me Makoto. Or use kun. More importantly, you’re awake? What happened? We’ve been meaning to call, but…. ” He kept going, but Nagito had wrapped the name in his mind and was studying it carefully. Makoto. He turned it in his mind like a rare gem. Makoto. Someone like him could never be familiar with the Ultimate Hope. But even he could be useful. He could give him the information he wanted.

“Naegi-kun, everyone’s awake. We all have our memories. All of them.” He let that thought hang for a second. “There were timers on all the pods. They had different dates and times. I think they may have had something to do with everyone waking up. Does the Future Foundation know anything about that?”

“No,” Naegi-kun said slowly. “I don’t remember anything like that. The pods were designed to keep you alive. I don’t really know the details. They had parts that would stimulate your muscles to prevent atrophy, and there was a steady oxygen flow. I’m sorry. I’m not being very helpful. But I know they didn’t have any timers for waking people up.”

Nagito hesitated. “Can I… trust them?”

That question was the reason he’d called, and yet he hated himself for asking it.
“Yes,” Naegi-kun answered almost immediately. “When we came to rescue you guys, Hinata-kun found a future that differed from ours, the Future Foundation’s, and Junko’s. He and the others stayed on the island to help you. All of you. If everyone’s woken up now, we’ll have to ship you guys more supplies. Only that might be a little difficult.”

“If Naegi-kun says to trust them, then I will!” Nagito said happily.

“Komaeda-kun,” Naegi-kun said, “if you remember our last conversation, then you should remember my talent. It’s the same as yours. The Ultimate Lucky Student. The Super High School Level Luckster. I’m not some kind of…you really don’t need to take my words as gospel. Hope isn’t like that. It’s nothing absolute, it’s just…believing the best in others and yourself.”

“What did you mean by difficult?” Nagito asked.

“Ah. Well, the thing is…I’ve been summoned to appear before the leaders of the Future Foundation in four days. They’re probably going to arrest me.”

Nagito processed this information silently. He could understand their reasoning, but still, a part of him rebelled at the very idea of arresting the Ultimate Hope. Ahaha. It was silly of him to feel that way. This despair would only be another stepping stone to strengthen the Ultimate Hope’s hope. Sure, he’d said not to trust his words as gospel. But he was wrong. Because he was the Ultimate Hope…but if that was the case, then how could he be wrong? Ah, it didn’t matter. This was Nagito’s fault. He must be misunderstanding again. The Ultimate Hope had defeated Junko Enoshima. But then, that was his fault too. His bad luck had failed to kill Junko…had failed to warn his classmates of her trap before it was too late. Without that, none of this would have happened. He wouldn’t have had to betray those he loved. Everything was his fault.

“Naegi-kun, I….” There was no way he could say it. There was no way he had any right to say it. And he’d already had the good luck of finding the phone and reaching Naegi-kun; he didn’t dare push it any further. He wondered if this was enough good luck to balance out the bad luck of failing to kill Junko again.

“Komaeda-kun.” Just from that, he knew the other had somehow understood all of that. For the first time in his life, Nagito felt like he’d been completely seen through. Someone understood everything he wanted to say, couldn’t say, and didn’t know how to say, and they didn’t hate him for it. “I’ll be fine. We’ll talk more after this whole mess is behind us, okay?”

“Oh, Nagito whispered. He hung up before he could start crying. The phone thumped against his bed. Walking into the bathroom, Nagito splashed water on his face. After a moment, he gave a shuddering sigh, dried his face, and returned to the bedroom. Sliding the phone into his pocket, he made his way to the lobby.

Fortunately, it was empty. People were moving around and talking upstairs though, so he had to be quick. He picked up one end of the charger and took out the phone. The door to the lobby shut.

“Did you hear that?” Mioda-kun’s voice rang out from upstairs. Nagito leapt back and banged his leg against the wall. The phone dropped to the ground. He hesitated for a second before turning to leave.

He’d made it halfway across the lobby when Kuzuryu-kun cried out. “So it was you, you son of a bitch!”

“Kuzuryu-kun!” Nagito faced him. “What might you—” Pain exploded across his face, and the next thing he knew, he was lying on his back. The world rang in a much harsher tone than the
Phone had. Liquid dripped into his mouth. Blood, he deduced from the taste of iron and salt. The feeling sinking into his face wasn’t unfamiliar, but he hadn’t felt it in a while. Even when he knew the others wanted to hit him, like Hinata-kun or Souda-kun, none of them did.

“Ahahahahaha!” He sat up, hearing his own laughter rattle in his ears. He was dimly aware of the lobby door being opened behind him, but he kept his gaze fixed on the boy in the suit. “What a magnificent punch, Kuzuryu-kun! Just as expected from the Ultimate Yakuza!” The others had run into the lobby from the restaurant. They assembled behind Kuzuryu-kun as if they were an army. That picture of unity was truly lovely.

The only ones missing were Hinata-kun, Nidai-kun, and...her. Tsumiki-kun. He didn’t understand why he felt this way about her. She was an Ultimate and, according to both Hinata-kun and Naegi-kun, free of despair. She was far greater than anything he could ever be. So then, why? Why did he feel so upset with her? Relegating that question to the back of his mind, he smiled at Kuzuryu-kun.

“The fuck were you doing with that phone, bastard? Trying to strand us all here? Trying to put us through some more of your hope bullshit?”

“I knew he couldn’t be trusted!” Souda-kun pointed at him accusingly. “He’s still trying to kill us all! We should tie him up and let the Future Foundation decide what to do with him.”

“You don’t usually have good ideas,” Kuzuryu-kun sighed, “but today must be an exception. Peko, hold him down while we go find some rope.”

“If anyone has a gag, that’d be good too,” Hanamura-kun added.

“Yay!” Saionji-kun threw her hands in the air. “Finally, some action!”

“I don’t really get it,” Owari-kun shrugged, “but it seems fine to me.”

Nagito’s heart felt like it was jumping in his chest. His breaths kept snagging in the back of his throat. The Ultimate Swordsman walked toward him. Every step closer changed her appearance until it was no longer Pekoyama-kun but an older man, eyes cold like stones, clutching a large knife in his right hand. Nagito couldn’t move his hands, and there was duct tape over his mouth, and the overhead light swaying on a chain kept turning into a spear and back every time it moved. He tried to scoot away, but his legs wouldn’t listen. He couldn’t even shake his head. His body had completely shut down, while his mind remained completely aware of this. He couldn’t move or speak, and the knife only got closer, and so did that face and with it came the scent of alcohol, overpowering, and—

“Hold on,” another voice said. It cut apart the image of the man towering over Nagito. It took him another few seconds to realize that the voice was Hinata-kun’s.

“What are you doing?” Kuzuryu-kun demanded. “It’s obvious Nagito stole the phone. I caught him red-handed.”

“So you’re going to tie him up?”

“We were all willing to give him a second chance, and he’s already wasted it. He’s proven he can’t be trusted.”

“That’s right!” Hanamura-kun added. “The phone may be a small thing, but with Komaeda-kun, things will only get bigger!”

“Indeed,” Tanaka-kun mused. “He may attempt another betrayal, one on a much grander scale.”
When Hinata-kun stayed silent, Nagito staggered to his feet. His head whirled in a thousand different directions. His heart sputtered like a dying car. How did none of them hear it? Pekoyama-kun kept getting closer. Spinning around, Nagito grabbed Hinata-kun’s arm. Stop it! His brain screamed at him to let go, to calm down, but his body still wasn’t listening to him.

“Hinata-kun,” his voice spoke without his consent, “Hinata-kun, please, please, don’t let them do this.” He’d seen that look of surprise on the other’s face many, many times. It was always slightly different too. Part of his mind registered his envy for the other. He had no trouble at all displaying his emotions. He didn’t have to be afraid of what would happen if he did.

Let go, he ordered again. This time, his hands obeyed. He felt each finger detach from Hinata-kun’s arm. He was in control again. It was okay. He was okay. “I’m sorry.” He laughed. "But seeing that look -"

Hinata-kun grabbed his wrist and pulled him closer. Nagito, caught off-guard, nearly tripped. “Hinata-kun?” The other was touching him. Actually touching him.

“We’re not tying anyone up,” he said, clearly directing the steel in his tone toward Kuzuryu-kun.

“What?” Kuzuryu-kun stepped forward. “You’re really still going to listen to this bastard?”

Hinata-kun turned to face him. “Nagito, tell me what you were doing with the phone. If you don’t, I don’t know if I can stop them.” Nagito weighed the unspoken threat in his mind. He was fairly confident Hinata-kun wouldn’t let them tie him up regardless, but the possibility wasn’t zero. He was always kind, but he also had a knack for being pragmatic. Even though he’d been a Reserve Course student, he’d been one of the leaders in all their class trials, surpassing even the other Ultimates. And on top of all that, Nagito couldn’t understand why Hinata-kun kept being so kind to someone like him.

Well, this wasn’t that great a secret anyway. Concealing it would do nothing to boost their hopes and revealing it would actually produce mild despair. Of course, the despair wouldn’t even be strong enough to be worth challenging. So revealing the information was neither beneficial nor harmful to the others.

“I wanted to talk to Naegi-kun,” he admitted.

“Why?”

“He said he’d been meaning to reach out to all of you. I told him everyone had woken up, and he said he’d see about sending more supplies when he could, but it would be difficult because he was about to be put on trial by the Future Foundation.”

As he’d expected, that news caused a small outburst, allowing his evasion to pass unnoticed.

“A trial?”

“For Naegi-kun?”

“Is it because he helped us?”

“What should we do?”

“What can we do?”

“Everyone!” Hinata-kun’s shout silenced the others. Nagito realized the other was still gripping his
arm. He decided against pointing this out. “Nagito, is that true?”

He nodded. Hinata-kun stared at him for a few more seconds before nodding as well. “Okay.”

“Tch. So we’re all just going to believe him so easily?”

‘FUYUHIKO!’ Nagito had expected Nevermind-san to speak, but it was Nidai-kun instead. “You’re being entirely too skeptical of your friends.”

“Friends?” Kuzuryu-kun laughed. “Don’t fuck with me. He’s not my friend. He’s not anyone’s friend.”

“That’s true,” Nagito said. “No one would want to be friends with someone like me. I completely understand that sentiment.”


Nagito felt his mouth opening and closing over and over, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. I do. What did that mean? What did he mean by that? Nagito slid the phrase onto a slide and studied it through a microscope.

“Look,” he heard Kuzuryu-kun say, “it’s just that….”

“Young master,” Pekoyama-kun urged, “perhaps you should let this one go.”

“Yeah,” Hanamura-kun added, “but if we do that—”

“Hanamura-kun,” Twogami-kun suddenly spoke up. He spoke loudly enough to make Nagito jump. “I’d like to speak with you. Accompany me.”


“Oh my God,” Koizumi-kun’s scowl was audible. “Just go, you pervert.”

It wasn’t the greatest way to end a conversation, but that seemed to do it. The others started breaking off into small groups, muttering to themselves. Nagito abandoned his study of Hinata-kun’s words. They weren’t going to come together in a way that made sense. As he turned to face him, he realized that his hand was now free.

“Nagito.” Hinata-kun sighed. “Why do you insist on being so difficult?”

Given that he’d just told them what they’d wanted to know, Nagito found the question to be unfair. He shook his head. “Thank you, Hinata-kun.” He spoke so softly that he wasn’t sure whether or not the other heard him. But then he saw his face soften, so he must have. His face hardened again, but he was looking at a spot behind Nagito. Turning, he saw Souda-kun approaching him.

“Yeah….” The Ultimate Mechanic wore a sheepish expression. He took a deep breath. “Look, Komaeda-kun. I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions. It’s just that it’s really hard, you know? I’m still trying to get used to all this myself, so, in a way, I can understand why you’d want to talk to Naegi-kun. I wish you’d just asked to use the phone.” Based on Hinata-kun’s face, this was a shared sentiment. Nagito thrust his hands into his coat pockets. “Ah!” Souda-kun pointed. “That reminds me. I have something to show you.”

Nagito blinked. “Me?”

“Yeah, you.”
“Is it about the timers on the pods?”

“Timers?” Hinata-kun looked between the two of them. “What timers?”

“Aw, nothing,” Souda-kun said. “Komaeda-kun showed me these timers on the pods and thought they might have something to do with why everyone woke up.”

“Jeez.” Hinata-kun rounded on Nagito. “Why didn’t you say this earlier?” Before Nagito could answer, he’d stormed over to the nearest pod.

“So…anyway,” Souda-kun continued, “I wanted to tell you about a robot arm.” Nagito glanced at him and raised his eyebrows invitingly. Souda-kun hissed and wound one hand through his hair. “Well, when you were still comatose, I was working on building you a robotic arm. I thought you might not want to have, you know, that attached to you. Think of it as an apology.”

“Apology?” Nagito smiled. “You don’t have to apologize to me, Souda-kun. Someone like me doesn’t—”

“AARGH!” Souda-kun pointed at him. “Stop that! Stop doing that! Jeez, man, don’t you realize how creepy that is?”

“Creepy?” Nagito tilted his head to the side, still smiling. “I don’t understand you.”

“That’s my line,” he muttered, “and everyone else’s too.”

“But thank you.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“Well, you went to all the trouble to build a robotic arm for me, right? So isn’t it only natural that I thank you?” Nagito hid his puzzlement behind his smile. He was pretty sure this was the right thing to do.

“Yeah, it just—it caught me off-guard, that’s all. Ahhh. You’re…welcome.” His hesitation disappeared with his next question. “So when did you want it? It’s ready now, so we could, you know, try it out.” Eagerness shone on his face. Nagito couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’d like that.” He looked at his glove one more time. If this worked, this hand would be gone. Her hand would be gone. What unbelievable luck! He waved the hand in the air and imagined it falling into the void and disappearing forever. Goodbye, despair.

Number of Students: 15

Chapter End Notes

Quick shoutout to VesperLord for correctly guessing the culprit!

So, about the canon compliancy in this chapter.

Danganronpa never officially established HOW the Remnants of Despair were recovered by the Future Foundation. The 2nd game, which is what I’m going with, makes it sound like they were willingly taken in while pretending to be the survivors
of Hope's Peak Academy. Makoto directly says that he and the others had no idea that they were the Remnants of Despair at first. But Danganronpa 3 makes it look like Munakata captured Peko and Fuyuhiko (and Nekomaru) in a battle, and Kimura captured Mikan. This doesn't make sense for two reasons. 1) That would mean they knew they were Remnants of Despair and 2) Why would Munakata ever capture a Remnant of Despair? He wouldn't. He'd just kill them. So the only way this can work WITHOUT being a plot hole is if all of those battles were stalemates, and the Remnants of Despair escaped, without their identities being discovered.

So I'm portraying it as the Remnants of Despair reuniting at Hope's Peak and asking the Future Foundation to come rescue them.

A few more canon-compliancy things with Nagito here:

I wanted to portray him as being more accepted and part of the group while in despair to emphasize its seductive nature. This is neither proven nor disproven in canon.

When Nagito and Makoto meet in the Hope Episode, neither ever says it's their first time meeting. Neither really even implies it. So they could (and likely did) meet before that. They could have easily met at Hope's Peak Academy, since they were both there for a while, and they could have also met while Nagito was in captivity/being rescued from the Future Foundation.

Nagito may or may not have issues with being tied up (the evidence is mixed). He does have issues with feeling powerless or humiliated. Thus his plea to Hajime here is motivated by this.

(Also, screw the Future Arc for making me rush all this to stay canon-compliant).

Anyway, this has been a super-long note, so if you've stuck with it this far, thank you!

As always, feel free to let me know your thoughts below. What did you like? What could I do better? What would you like to see in the future?
Chapter Summary

Nagito and Peko talk about love; Nagito and Izuru have a verbal showdown.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sitting on his bed, Nagito let his legs dangle over the side as he watched Pekoyama-kun make her preparations. “Thank you again for agreeing to help trash like me,” he said. She pushed her hair back but otherwise gave no indication that she’d even heard him. She’d already stopped responding after the fourth time he thanked her, so that was nothing new. Was he saying it too many times? Was that wrong? She hadn’t told him to stop though, and he didn’t know what else to say.

“Komaeda-kun!” Tsumiki-kun murmured, “you need to lie down now.” Nagito sat up even straighter. Since Souda-kun had so kindly fashioned him a new arm, he wanted the abomination attached to him gone as quickly as possible. Not that he would dare rush the Ultimates, but he thought they’d be happy to see her hand gone as well. Kuzuryu-kun had the eyepatch, and he had the glove, or he used to anyway before they took it away, but a physical cover did little to hide the memories. There was no point in dwelling though. In a way, they needed to be grateful to Junko for serving as a stepping stone for their hopes.

Grateful to Junko? No, that was ludicrous.

He wished he had the glove though. Looking at those long, red nails sickened him.

“Please lie down,” Tsumiki-kun tried again. Nagito wondered why they’d chosen to do the operation in his bedroom. Sure, they had no way to reach the hospital on the third island. They didn’t even know whether or not the hospital really existed. Well, they were Ultimates. Nagito had accepted their decision without complaint. If this was what they thought was best, then he would gladly sleep in a pool of his blood.

Pekoyama-kun had retrieved her real sword from within the bamboo one, and she was presently occupied with heating it to reduce the risk of infection. Such careful planning was truly fitting of an Ultimate! A faint sizzling filled the room as sparks danced against the metal. Hopefully his luck wouldn’t result in his cottage burning down. Maybe he should warn everyone. The fire might spread after all. It could burn down all the cottages, or maybe even kill someone.

“Komaeda-kun!” Tsumiki-kun actually pushed him down.

“Pekoyama-kun,” Nagito said cheerfully, “not that it really matters, but I wonder if you plan to have someone watch Tsumiki-kun to make sure she doesn’t try to murder me.” Tsumiki-kun squealed and leapt away from the bed. As Pekoyama-kun turned toward him, eyes flashing in surprise, Nagito sighed. “Of course, I can understand if you choose not to.”

“W-w-what are you saying?” Tsumiki-kun lifted her hands to her mouth. “I w-w-would never!”

“Ah, I’m sure Mioda-kun and Saionji-kun thought so too,” Nagito said agreeably. For some
reason, Tsumiki-kun started crying. “Didn’t you say love makes you do strange things? Ah, not that I would know anything about that. Perhaps I’ve misunderstood.” She flinched, and Nagito held in a laugh. Why had that felt so satisfying? After all, she was no longer Ultimate Despair. She was no guiltier than any of the others, himself included. So why could he forgive them but not her? His own resentment both fascinated and repulsed him. What right did he have to feel this way about an Ultimate? She was a Symbol of Hope. He should revere her. And yet….

“Tsumiki-san.” The other woman spoke for the first time. “Can you fetch Souda-kun for me?”

“Y-yes,” she whimpered, backing out of the cottage. “Don’t s-start until we c-come back. I have to g-give Komaeda-kun his medicine.”

“Don’t worry,” the Ultimate Swordswoman smiled. Or at least, she tried to. Nagito had had more than enough experience practicing a false smile to recognize someone else’s. “We’ll wait.” Once the other left, she directed her sharp gaze to him. “What was that?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Nagito said.

“What are you trying to accomplish with Tsumiki-san?”

“Nothing.” He could tell she didn’t believe him, but he was used to that. Her disbelief really didn’t matter at all. No one had ever really believed him or trusted him. Maybe he should try saying a little more. Or maybe not. “Say, Pekoyama-kun, how have things been between you and Kuzuryu-kun?” She recoiled as if he’d slapped her. Nagito frowned. “Huh? Did I say something wrong? Ah, perhaps I’m being intrusive? I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s just…it has been difficult. My young master has been trying to act tough, but he still can’t forgive himself for the things he did as Ultimate Despair. It has been hard for him. I think that is why he lashed out at you. He has nightmares every time he sleeps. Right now, he needs me to support him, not to make things more difficult.”

Nagito heard hope glittering within those words. “Forgive me if I’m saying too much, and maybe I’m in no position to say this at all, but isn’t loving someone about supporting them? That’s what I’ve heard. Two people who mutually confide in and rely on each other, who push each other to be better versions of themselves, who stand by each other no matter how much despair they face—isn’t that what it means to love someone?”

Pekoyama-kun adjusted her glasses. “Didn’t you tell Hanamura-kun something very different?”

“Did I?” Nagito smiled. “Ah, that. Well, I wanted him to kill me.”

Pekoyama-kun said nothing. Nagito chewed on his lower lip. He’d said too much after all. Then, “I don’t know if you’re right. Loving someone is unfamiliar to me. Since I was abandoned by my parents, all I have known is my duty to the Kuzuryu clan.”

“I see.” Nagito sat up. “I can understand that feeling.”

She looked at him. “You’ve never been in love?”

He smiled. “I love all of you guys. And I love hope.”

“But you’ve never been in love with anyone?” She opened the window of his cottage, letting in a stream of fresh air. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”
“Kuzuryu-kun has told me everything that happened since…well, then.” Had she noticed she’d used her young master’s name? “And it seems fairly obvious. Perhaps that’s the wrong way of putting it. I should say that it seems fairly obvious to me. At any rate, Komaeda-kun, aren’t you in love with Hinata-kun?”

Everything stopped.

“Oh…ahaha…AHAAAAHAHAHA!” That shrill laughter—was that him? “Love Hinata-kun? Hinata-kun, who was so kind? So open? Talentless Hinata-kun? Love him? It’s impossible! Impossible, impossible, impossible. There’s no way someone like me can be allowed to love him. I can’t. I can’t! Hinata-kun…he deserves so much better. Someone who won’t make him suffer. Someone who makes him happy. SO I CAN’T LOVE HIM!”

The room spun, darkened, steadied. Nagito’s chest heaved as he gulped in air. His brain screamed at him. It felt like it did that with greater frequency. Like he was losing what little sense of control he’d once had. Shut up. You overdid it. Shut up. Now. Still gasping, Nagito wiped his mouth with the back of his good hand. He needed to do some damage control. “I mean…it’s impossible anyway. Hinata-kun loves Nanami-san. Ah, don’t look like that. I don’t want you to misunderstand. I think that’s wonderful. They would be wonderful together. Well, if she were…here.”

Pekoyama-kun stared at him. Her eyes held the same strength as Hinata-kun’s when he got angry, but their red intensity reminded him of Kamukura-kun. He reclined so that he didn’t have to look at her. “You know, Komaeda-kun, I almost hate to say this, but you and I are very similar in that regard.”

“Huh? What…what does that mean? What do you mean by in that regard?”

“In the way that we both push aside our feelings for the one we love for their own good or to do our duty. I understand that feeling. It leaves one…lonely.” Oh. Her kind words…. He hadn’t thought Pekoyama-kun was the kind of person who would speak so freely. Perhaps this was because her hope had grown.

“I’m not lonely, Pekoyama-kun. Sure, I’m alone, but I’m used to that. It doesn’t bother me. In fact, I quite prefer it sometimes. You said Kuzuryu-kun told you everything. So didn’t he tell you that I tried to kill Hinata-kun? I wouldn’t have done that if I loved him, would I?”

“Then tell me.” She folded her arms. She had a way of looking at him that reminded him of the librarian at Hope’s Peak Academy—the kind of look that said, go ahead. Break a rule. I dare you.

Nagito pulled the blanket over his legs. Even though the island was usually very warm, except at night, Nagito was often cold. That was why he had no trouble wearing his coat. He knew the reason behind that too, though he chose not to think about it.

“Komaeda-kun.” Pekoyama-kun walked over to him and reached out, as if to take his hand, but instead lowered her arm. “I don’t want you to make the same mistake as me. I kept bottling up my feelings because I thought they would burden my…Fuyuhiko. I thought there was no way he could return them. I was meant to be his tool. That was all. So I thought he couldn’t love me. And he must have felt the same way. By the time we’d worked up the courage to be honest with one another, it was too late. That feeling…no one should ever have to feel that way.”

“But Pekoyama-kun.” Nagito rolled over to face her. “Overcoming that despair gave you an even greater hope, no? Ah, perhaps not. You seem to be making the same mistake now.”
“What did you say?”

“Aren’t you bottling up your feelings again? And after you’ve both confessed too. I don’t really understand it.”

“I told you, now just isn’t a good time for—”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were afraid.”

Pekoyama-kun hissed. “What about you then? Aren’t you afraid?”

Always. “Afraid? Of what?”

“You know what. Of being honest with yourself about Hajime.” Had she actually used his first name to try and make him jealous? Surely not.

“Tell me, Pekoyama-kun. Do you believe everyone deserves to be happy?”

She backed away. “That question is wasted on me. I have taken far too many lives to say anything about deserving, let alone happiness.”

“And yet we all want it anyway.” Nagito held himself. “Isn’t that amazing? That unending desire driving everyone forward—it can only be called hope!” He chuckled softly to himself. “I truly think that it’s a wonderful thing.”

“…You’re terrible,” Pekoyama-kun finally said. “How can you sit there and lie like that?”

“Lie? What lie? I don’t think I’m lying.” That said, he could understand why she might think that.

“What about your hope, Komaeda-kun? Don’t you have any hope for yourself?”

Disappointment settled over him. So she didn’t understand either. But that was to be expected. No one understood. No one had even tried. No one…except Hinata-kun. He had tried, and seeing him try made Nagito want to help him. He wanted to make it easier for the other boy. But he knew he couldn’t. Maybe he had lied a little bit. Just a little. He was in love with Hinata-kun because…because Hinata-kun had been the only one. The only one to be kind…to not call him crazy…to try and understand him. Even so, Pekoyama-kun didn’t understand. Maybe they were similar in that way, but she was ignoring a few important distinctions. How disappointing to see her shy away from the truth.

The truth that he didn’t want Hinata-kun to love him back.

The door opened, and Tsumiki-kun and Souda-kun entered.

“Yo.” Souda-kun waved the robotic arm. “We’re here now.”

“Y-y-yes,” Tsumiki-kun agreed somewhat unnecessarily. “Are you ready, Pekoyama-san? Komaeda-kun?” When neither of them objected, Mikan nodded to herself. She retrieved a long needle from somewhere on her person. “Then I’m going to give this to Komaeda-kun now.”

Nagito watched as she approached. Her movements were firm, graceful even, and he couldn’t help but admire them. She hadn’t stuttered either. Seeing an Ultimate in her element like this—ah, how beautiful. If only he could savor this moment and treasure it forever.

His conversation with Pekoyama-kun had helped him realize why he was upset with Tsumiki-kun. Knowing the reason only made him feel worse.
You don’t understand? Is it because you don’t have anyone to love? Is it because you’re also someone who isn’t accepted by anyone? What a pity. I feel sorry for you.

Those words. Why did they bother him? Everyone was happy to call him crazy, psychopathic, evil. Praise tasted far stranger than insults. He knew how to handle insults. Just smile and laugh and say they were right. But praise? Even his mother had never seen anything in him worth praising. He’d made peace with who and what he was, hadn’t he? He didn’t matter at all. His very existence was insignificant, and no one would even care if died right now, so what right did he have to get so upset? Nothing made sense on this island. Not since he’d woken up after inhaling poison and being impaled. Ever since then, he felt like he’d been breaking down, one piece at a time.

And he didn’t know how to put himself back together.

“Tsumiki-kun,” he said as she was about to insert the needle into his arm. Pausing, she glanced at him. Her hair tumbled over her shoulder and nearly spilled into his lap. Her face was even easier to read than Hinata-kun’s. Concern and the desire to help him. That was it. Not even the slightest hint of despair.

“Komaeda-kun.” The needle pierced his skin easily. The sting was nothing compared to the feeling of a knife sticking through his hand. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Nagito beamed. “That shot was for my own good, right? After all, if I was awake during the operation, I would just be in the way, right?”

“N-n-not for that,” she half-sobbed. “For w-w-what I said to you in the g-game.”

“Eh?” Souda-kun looked confused. “What about the game?” From the corner of his eye, Nagito saw Pekoyama-kun pull him away.

“Tsumiki-kun, you really don’t have to worry,” Nagito said.

“But I do!” She insisted. “It was s-so cruel, and I just…I…oh, forgive me!” She seemed genuinely distressed. He opened his mouth, but she didn’t give him a chance to speak. “And, I mean, it wasn’t true. It wasn’t true at all! B-because, you see, um, um, I appreciate you, Komaeda-kun.”

A wave of drowsiness threatened to pull him under. His reaction to Tsumiki-kun’s words sank beneath it. Souda-kun said something that sounded like, “yeah, you’re our friend.” That shot must have gotten to him quicker than he’d thought. Not just because he could barely keep his eyes open, but because he was definitely hearing things that didn’t make sense.

The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was all of their faces staring down at him. As he watched, their expressions of concern and compassion bled into one, disintegrating and re-fusing until it was Hinata-kun staring down at him. Those soft green eyes grew larger and larger until Nagito felt himself falling into them. If he fought, he could remain awake for a few more seconds. But since it was Hinata-kun, he didn’t fight.

When he awoke, it took a minute to be sure he actually had. Everything was dark. A blank, off-white ceiling hung over him. The ocean waves hummed in the distance. A soft surface sunk beneath him, and a sheet had twisted around his ankle. His head felt remarkably clear. That seemed strange. Given his past experiences with hospitals, he’d expected to be woozy, or have his head filled with white noise. Perhaps this counted as good luck then?

“You’re awake.”
With his mind clear Nagito placed that dull monotone instantly. “Kamukura-kun? Why are you here?”

“I am where I should be.”

Nagito’s eyes hadn’t adjusted yet, but he recognized enough to know that he was no longer in his cottage. “Ah. I see. Why am I in your room, Kamukura-kun?”

“Kazuichi and Mikan strongly objected to leaving you in your room with all that blood everywhere. They complained about a high possibility of infection. Peko said that you would be most comfortable in this room. It was exactly what I expected.”

“Aha. Did she?” If there was blood everywhere, then it must have worked. He couldn’t feel anything at all. No, wait. His left arm did seem heavier than usual. He couldn’t seem to lift it though. “And why are you here, Kamukura-kun?”

“Hajime was trying so hard to stay awake.” As he spoke, a throbbing ache began pulsing in his arm. The pain was far weaker than he had expected, but it nonetheless grated against him. He resolved to accept it gladly. It meant he was free from Ultimate Despair.

Nagito gazed at the glowing red eyes. “So you take over when Hinata-kun is asleep?”

“Don’t ask questions to which you already know the answers.” If he didn’t know better, he’d have thought Kamukura-kun actually sounded annoyed. He wondered if someone like him could actually annoy Kamukura-kun. Would that be considered hope? Or despair?

“I suppose you’re right,” he allowed. “Then, if you’ll permit me, I’ll ask a question to which I don’t know the answer. Why did you wake us up?”

“What makes you think I did?”

“Don’t ask questions to which you already know the answers,” Nagito parroted.

“Sass is unlike you, Nagito. Especially when you’re speaking to someone who could be called the Ultimate Talent.”

Nagito laughed. “Your talents are fake.”

“Is that what you tell Hajime? I wonder. What would you do if I told you he could hear all of this? Would you react as I predict you would? Or would you surprise me? Are you even capable of that?”

“Does it matter?” Nagito allowed his lips to curl into a sneer. “We both know he can’t hear us.” One of the few things he deeply regretted was making fun of Hinata-kun. That night, when Nagito had shown up in Hinata-kun’s cottage and asked him to escort him to the lobby, he’d said terrible things to Hinata-kun. Just as he had in Grape House. He recalled his words as clearly as he recalled all the medical books he’d read to learn about his diagnosis.

Since you’re not an Ultimate, you’ve basically been left out since the start.

The look on Hinata-kun’s face had made him reconsider his entire plan. He’d wanted to fall to his knees, lick Hinata-kun’s shoes, and beg for forgiveness. But he couldn’t. He needed Hinata-kun to bring him to the lobby. That boy was too nice for his own good. If Nagito hadn’t said those things, he wouldn’t have escorted him. He might have even tried to warn him or stop him.
But Nagito needed him to come to the lobby. And so he got him there using the only methods he understood. Even so, he’d tried to warn Hinata-kun—it was a joke, you shouldn’t take me so seriously. At the very least, he’d resolved to stop teasing the other for it. And he had too, for the miniscule amount it was worth. Even now, he wasn’t sure if he had meant to be that cruel, or it was another side effect of his dementia.

“No one else could have set up those timers,” Nagito said, more to escape his own thoughts than to continue the conversation. “Only you and Souda-kun, and he obviously didn’t do it.”

Kamukura-kun didn’t even blink. “Bringing you all back was slightly less boring than leaving you comatose.”

“Was that your only reason?”

“Was it?”

Picturing the look of frustration on Hinata-kun’s face if he could hear this amused Nagito. “So are you two like Fukawa-san and Genocider Syo? You don’t share memories?”

The red orbs didn’t move. “How boring.”

“You criticize the others for having weak hope and being unable to make progress on their own. Look at you now. Truths exist in this world regardless of how the talentless attempt to conceal them. Creatures capable only of self-delusion—such weak hope.”

“You criticize the others for having weak hope and being unable to make progress on their own. Look at you now. Truths exist in this world regardless of how the talentless attempt to conceal them. Creatures capable only of self-delusion—such weak hope.”

“Is it?” Nagito considered how best to draw the other deeper into the conversation. “Sure, the will of the world bends to those who lack talent. That will can be cruel in its mandates. Talent is not a matter of effort. The moment you’re born, you either have it, or you don’t. That’s what I’d been believing. But you, Kamukura-kun, you were created. You were created by the hope of a talentless Reserve Course student named Hajime Hinata. Doesn’t that strike you as strange?”

When the other stayed silent, Nagito had no choice but to continue. “You once told me that the talentless contribute nothing to the world. Not even a speck of dust. So explain Hajime Hinata.”

He hadn’t realized how much he wanted to hear the answer until he finished speaking. He’d actually gotten off the bed and moved to sit on the floor across from Kamukura-kun, as if reducing the physical distance between them would bring an answer sooner. Something cold and sharp dug into his arm. Black spots danced across his vision. His head throbbed too, beating as if it was his heart. Hesitantly, he touched it with his good hand. He felt something on his scalp, jagged and rough, like some sort of scar.

“Is that what you call love?” Kamukura-kun’s question briefly distracted Nagito. “Your feelings toward Hajime are boring. Your argument is unimpressive in its logic. But,” and there was a miniscule shift in his tone, “that you of all people would make such an argument is interesting. You are correct. Hajime is interesting.”

“So there’s something even you don’t understand.” Nagito smiled. “Are you sad her hand is gone?”

“I have no reason to be sad.”

“Can you be sad?”

“I know what sadness feels like.”
“Did you love her? Or hate her?”

“Junko Enoshima was interesting. Now she is not. Chiaki Nanami was interesting. Now she is not.”

Nanami-san? Nagito scooted closer. “Isn’t that a reason to be sad?”

“It is the way of the world. The talentless oppress the talented.”

“Are they equally boring?”

“Nagito, would you be sad if Hajime died?”

Nagito felt like all of his arguments disintegrated. Like he’d been reading a book only to have all the words disappear. He should have expected this rebuttal, but he hadn’t. “It’s pointless to think about the dead.”

“That doesn’t answer me.”

“You haven’t answered me.”

“A stalemate, then. How boring.” Kamukura-kun’s stillness was otherworldly. He didn’t flinch or shift to a more comfortable position or look at his nails or blink or do anything. He just sat as if he’d been moulded out of stone. “Even humoring you is boring.”

“But Hinata-kun is interesting.”

“Yes.”

“Then would you be sad if he died?”

“That mark you felt on your head is a scar left over from surgery.”

“Surgery?” The abruptness of the topic change unbalanced Nagito again. He felt like he was treading on a frozen lake. This wouldn’t do at all. He ran his fingers over the bumps on his head. The others wouldn’t have let Tsumiki-kun open his head, not while they were transplanting an arm. Then again, they had no reason to be concerned for him. But even so, he couldn’t see why they would even want to do something like that. “What did you do?”

Not a single muscle in his face changed, but Nagito knew he was considering whether or not to respond. “I cured your dementia.”

The four words didn’t come together in a way that made sense. They crashed into one another and crumbled into a mess of fire and smoke. It was incurable. The Ultimate Hope could do anything. It was a miracle. It was a disaster. What amazing good luck! What terrible bad luck! It was a lie. It must be a lie. Why was it a lie? There was no reason for it to be a lie. What luck! Cured. Impossible. What luck hope brain despair feeling tragedy Ultimate light free trapped free trapped around around again parents infinite wheel murderer murdered traitor betrayal lies life friend alone love Hajime.


Nagito ran and ran until the night swallowed him whole.

Number of Students: 15
I know the last few chapters have been pretty dramatic. The next one is too, so I'm opening the next one with a nice little happy scene. You'll see what I mean. :-) 

As always, thanks so much for reading! If there's anything you liked, anything I could work on, or anything you'd like to see in the future, please feel free to leave a comment letting me know! Enjoy this update, and I'll see you all for the next chapter!
“How about Mario Kart?” Chiaki inserted the game into the console without waiting for anyone to reply. “Kazuichi and I set it up so 8 people can play.” Hajime raised his eyebrows but didn’t comment.

“Aaah,” Kazuichi groaned. “With a little more time, I could have gotten it to 16, but then I’d need a bigger monitor, and the resolution would be—”

“I think it’s fine,” Mahiru said. “It’s amazing that you can do all that. When it comes to machines, you really know your stuff, Kazuichi. So who all’s playing anyway?”

“Hmm.” Chiaki tapped a slender finger against her chin. “Teruteru and Akane are making dinner for everyone, and Fuyuhiko and Peko went off somewhere. So that means they won’t be playing… I think.”

“If Akane’s helping, there won’t be any food left for the rest of us,” Hiyoko complained.

“I’ll go check on her,” Nekomaru thrust out his chest and left.

“Gundham-chan and Sonia-chan went to the zoo,” Ibuki hollered. “Ibuki would have gone too, but they wanted her to stay and make sure Kazuichi-chan didn’t follow them.” Yeah, that made sense.

“Hey!” Kazuichi’s outburst sparked a wave of laughter.

“So, everyone who’s left?” Chiaki proposed. “Me, Hajime, Kazuichi, Ibuki, Mikan, Mahiru, Hiyoko, and Twogami?”

“Such low-class entertainment is beneath me,” Twogami sneered. “But if you insist, I would not object to attempting it.” Just…come out and say you want to do it. Jesus. Were all the Ultimates this roundabout?

“Oh.” Chiaki frowned. “Wait a minute. What about Nagito?” Hajime glanced back at the white-haired boy sitting quietly at his desk. While the others had cleared a large space for the television and games, Nagito had sat there the whole time. He wasn’t watching them exactly, but he wasn’t looking away either. Truth be told, Hajime had forgotten about him.

“Oh no.” Nagito put out his hands like he was pushing someone away. “Someone like me would only ruin the fun for everyone else.” There he went again, putting himself down. It wasn’t his constant self-deprecation that annoyed Hajime. Well, maybe it was, but that wasn’t just it. After all, Mikan did that too, but he felt bad for her more than anything else. It was the way Nagito trashed himself that really got to him—that dry, matter-of-fact edge to it, as if it didn’t even bother him. As if he were reciting facts from a textbook.

“Hmm.” Chiaki said again. “The person who comes in last switches out. Is that okay?”

“Awww, it is on!” Ibuki grinned.

“No, no,” Nagito insisted. “None of you should have to give up anything for me.”
“Sounds fair to me,” Mahiru told Chiaki.

“Well,” Hiyoko scowled, “if Mahiru says it’s okay, then I do too.”

“I agree with that,” Hajime added. “Nice thinking, Chiaki.”

“Thanks. I won’t lose though.” Hajime smiled and focused on the screen. In the brief time he’d been distracted with Nagito and Chiaki, the character selection screen had already loaded. Ibuki handed out controllers.

“This Bowser suits me well,” Twogami reflected. “Powerful and wealthy.”

“Kyaah! He’s so cute!” Ibuki cooed over Baby Mario.

“Then I’ll smash him.” Hiyoko chose Donkey Kong. “Smashing cute things is so much fun!”

“Let’s have a clean game, everyone,” Mahiru remarked as she picked Peach. Hajime caught Chiaki shoot her a quick glare before picking Rosalina. He smiled.

“I d-d-don’t really know who t-to pick,” Mikan said, switching back and forth between just about every character. She landed on Shy Guy, shrieked, and flipped to Toadette instead. Hajime expected her to jump around a bit more, but she seemed pleased with her choice.

“I’m not that good at actually playing these games,” Kazuichi said. “Who should I pick?”

“How about Daisy, since you have the same fashion sense?” Hiyoko sniggered.

“Hey!” Kazuichi pointed at her accusingly. “I’ll have you know girls love my outfit!” That obviously wasn’t true, but Hajime decided against commenting. He couldn’t really decide on a character either. Mario would be the boring choice, but…oh what the hell. He chose Mario.

“Seriously,” Kazuichi said. “There’s so many here.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Hajime told him. “You’ll lose anyway.”

“Oh, you think so? Well, we’ll just see about that.” He selected Yoshi, and the game began. Chiaki chose an easy course to start out with, which Hajime hoped might benefit him. He wasn’t good at these games either. He wasn’t bad by any means, but he was pretty sure he was what people called a casual gamer. He didn’t really mind being average though. Not as long as it was fun.

It didn’t end up mattering. Chiaki won easily. ‘Several minutes before anyone else’ easily. Of course. Hajime found himself stuck in fourth, between Mahiru and Twogami. He’d actually started out in last place, but he’d advanced quickly after Hiyoko kept knocking Ibuki off the course and then stopping to wait for her, but only so she could knock her off again.

“Kyaaaah!” Ibuki yelled as she finally ended her misery by limping over the finish line. “That was sooo mean, Hiyoko-chan!”

“It was fun though,” she said, still cackling.

“Grrrr!” Ibuki actually growled before handing her controller to Nagito. “Nagito-chan, you better beat her! Ibuki’s putting her hope in you.”

“Hope?”

“Just get over here,” Hajime said, scooting over to make room for him. Since they were selecting
levels one at a time rather than as a gauntlet, the game returned to the character selection screen. Everyone picked the same people except for Nagito, who picked Luigi.

“No one’s giving Wario any love,” Hiyoko observed. “How about you, Mr. Bigami?”

“That insult wasn’t clever enough to merit a response,” Twogami returned.

“It’s starting!” Chiaki sat up straight. Hajime barely stopped himself from laughing at her eagerness. She really was adorable like this. He wanted to ruffle her hair but settled for watching the clip she wore swing back and forth.

Then the race began, and Hajime no longer had any time to admire her. He swerved around Hiyoko, who seemed determined to cover the entire track in banana peels. Mikan as Toadette somehow managed to hit three of them in rapid succession, and she apologized each time, despite the fact that Hiyoko was definitely at fault. Hajime passed Twogami as well, who seemed more preoccupied with collecting coins than winning.

“YES!” Kazuichi’s shout nearly broke his concentration. Using a gold mushroom, Yoshi sailed to the front of the pack, passing even Chiaki. “What the hell? I’m winning? Holy shit! Is this a dream you guys? I’m actually winning! Oh, if only Miss Sonia was here—”

A blue shell knocked him into the wall and off the track. Hajime honestly wasn’t sure how that was possible. “AAARGH!” For a second, Kazuichi looked like he might throw the controller. “Which one of you threw that? Confess! Come on, confess!” Hajime risked glancing away from the screen to see his friends. Immediately he noticed Nagito trying very hard not to laugh. Which, of course, made Hajime laugh.

“Dammit,” Kazuichi moaned. “Now Miss Sonia will never love me.” Hajime shook his head. It was probably better not to point out that winning a racing game wouldn’t change her feelings.

A red shell slammed into the back of his car, and Mahiru zoomed past him. Nagito followed a second later. “Don’t worry, Hinata-kun. I’ve got your back!” He flung a red shell of his own, and the karma was just too perfect not to laugh at.

“Hey!” Mahiru objected as they both passed her. “How does Nagito always get the perfect item at the perfect time?”

“Hey, Chiaki.” Hajime nudged her with his elbow. “I’m catching up.”

Her Rosalina executed a perfect right turn. “No.”

“But I can see you.” He drove through a box, hoping for a red shell. No such luck; he got a green one instead.

“Nope,” she asserted. The finish line was getting closer and closer, so her confidence wasn’t unwarranted. But maybe if he could just…

“Come on,” he muttered to no one in particular. “Come on, come on. I can still—”

“Don’t you understand, Hajime?” The ice in her tone drew his gaze to her and held it in place. She stared back at him with reptilian eyes. “You won’t catch up. You’ll never see me again.”

Pain exploded along the back of his head. He instinctively covered the area, moaning and barely refraining from swearing. There wasn’t any blood on his hand though, so that was a good sign. He looked around.
He was in his cottage. There was no TV, no games. Chiaki and the others were gone too. He was alone, sitting against the wall opposite his bed. Based on the pain, he must have just accidentally cracked his head against that wall and…wait, huh? Nagito was supposed to be here, wasn’t he? Where was he? Had someone taken him? Or had he done it himself? But Nagito shouldn’t have been in any condition to move by himself. Then again, that guy was full of surprises.

Hajime hurried out of his cottage. Judging from the pink glow in the sky, it was still early. The others might not even be awake yet. Should he get them to help look for Nagito? If something had happened to him, that would be the best decision. Or what if this was a trap? Since this was Nagito, he couldn’t rule out either possibility. The last thing he wanted was for everyone to get into another fight. They’d already been doing that far too much. If this was a trap, it was best not to jeopardize the others. If something had happened to Nagito, then, well, he would do something. He’d help him somehow.

Why did he care so much? He couldn’t help remembering the time when Nagito had been infected by the Despair Disease. He’d been deeply concerned then too, and like now, he hadn’t been able to explain why. No, he could think about that later. Finding Nagito came first.

Off the top of his head, he could think of three possible locations for the other. The library. The beach. And his own cottage. He doubted it was that last one, but since it was right there, he checked just in case. The bed had been stripped, but there were still traces of blood on the walls and floor. He trusted Mikan to thoroughly disinfect the room before allowing anyone to live here. And indeed, there was no one here.

The beach was similarly empty. The surface of the sea reflected the first traces of sunlight. It really was beautiful. Hajime wished he had better words to describe it.

Not the Ultimate Poet, eh, Kamukura?

No response. He hurried to the library. The air hadn’t warmed yet, and he found himself rubbing his arms and wishing he’d grabbed a coat. Not that he had one but still. How could it get this cold on a tropical island? He ran faster. He could imagine Mahiru saying something like, “it’s your own fault for wearing short sleeves.” Yeah, well, maybe. He’d never make fun of Nagito’s coat again, or maybe he would, but only when he was warm.

He pushed open the door to the library. Even before he saw Nagito, he knew he was in the right place. He felt it. The sight of that mop of white hair served as a final confirmation. Nagito sat against one of the bookshelves with his knees pulled up to his chest. He was making little, quiet…sobs? Was that right? He wasn’t still dreaming, was he? Nagito, crying? This couldn’t have been an act either. The other boy didn’t seem to even notice his presence. In the game, it had been so easy to dismiss Nagito as insane. Even though he’d known it wasn’t as simple as that, he’d tried to ignore that and convince himself otherwise. Everything would be so much easier if he could just turn a blind eye and get Nagito out of his head.

That’s what he had tried to do. He’d made a few efforts to reach out to the other boy, but overall, his fear had kept him away. And as a result, Nagito had set up an elaborate trap to kill not only himself but everyone else too. After Hajime learned that same truth, that they were all Ultimate Despair, he could understand why he’d done it. He could even almost admire the courage it had taken. For Nagito to stab himself over and over and over again…. But part of him wondered if he could have stopped it. If he’d tried harder to help Nagito, to understand him, could he have stopped him? Could they have found another way? He hated admitting it even to himself, but every time he’d seen Nagito lying comatose in that pod, a sliver of guilt nibbled at the edges of his mind.

Standing up straight, Hajime walked right over to Nagito. He wouldn’t make the same mistake.
As he sat down next to him, Hajime wondered if he should feel more bothered. First Mikan, now this. He’d never been good at comforting other people. Then again, he’d never really had a reason to. His attempts with Fuyuhiko’s sister had been disastrous. Not to mention that when they’d first arrived on the island, he’d been the one who needed comforting. And the others had abandoned him on the beach. All except Nagito. If their situations had been reversed, would he have stayed behind to help Nagito? It frightened him that he couldn’t immediately say yes.

Even so, what was he supposed to do now? Sonia had thought he was great with words. She said he’d saved her from the crushing weight of Junko’s despair. He still attributed that to Chiaki, but… well, he would just say whatever came to mind. He would do it, and things would turn out okay.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He asked.

Nagito gave a shaky laugh. “Oh, it’s silly, Hinata-kun. I’m sorry you came all the way out here just to see me. I was just reading one of the books here, and it had a sad ending, that’s all.”

Hajime looked around, but there wasn’t any sign that any of the books on the shelves had been disturbed. “What happened?”

“It seems sad endings are so popular nowadays. I wouldn’t mind so much except that it glorifies despair. Don’t you think it’s disgusting, Hinata-kun? The story ends, and the character loses hope. Everything they thought they knew about the world gets shattered in an instant, and in the end, they die meaninglessly, knowing everything they lived for was in vain. What do you think of stories like that?”

The last time he’d been asked this question, his honest answer had upset Nagito. But his honest answer hadn’t changed since then. “I think I’d have to read it first. Endings are important, but they’re not everything.”

“I always liked children’s fairy tales.” Nagito chuckled. “My mom used to read them to me at night. Well, she did when she had the time anyway. She made a point to only read them in English, which I suspect was her true goal all along. Hope isn’t bound by language, Hinata-kun.” Hajime, too, remembered hearing fairy tales as a kid, though since he didn’t know any English, he was fairly confident they’d been in Japanese.

“I want you to go now,” Nagito said suddenly.

Hajime didn’t know what he’d said wrong. “Nagito, did you—?”

“Please leave.” He moved as if trying to hide his face behind his coat only to realize he didn’t have it with him.

“I can’t do that,” Hajime said. Part of him felt guilty. Nagito never asked anyone to do anything, especially not for his own benefit. But the rest of him—

“I don’t have the Liar’s Disease this time,” Nagito said. “So go. I don’t want you here.”

“Is that about me being Kamukura?” Hajime glanced down. “I wasn’t trying to keep it a secret or anything. I just didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Are you deaf as well as talentless?” His face masked it well, but Hajime saw the tremor run through his body at that word. “Leave.”
Hajime swallowed his growing irritation. “Nagito, I’m scared of what you’ll do if I leave now.”

Nagito laughed. It wasn’t his crazy laugh, but it wasn’t exactly friendly either. It sounded more like some strange combination of the two. “I won’t do anything to hurt you.”

“That’s a lie.” The boldness of his own words surprised him.

Nagito raised his eyebrows. “It’s not.”

“Nagito, if you hurt yourself, that would hurt me.” Hajime thought he would have to force the words out. They’d been etched across his heart even from the first time he met Nagito, and after everything that had happened in the game, he couldn’t keep pretending otherwise. He didn’t want to take the easy way out by lying to himself anymore. He wanted to embrace the future he’d chosen, no matter how painful it was. Yes, he was scared of the other, terrified even, but even so, he still wanted to understand him.

The look of surprise on Nagito’s face was...adorable. It bothered Hajime that he couldn’t think of another word to describe it, but only a little. The look actually suited him. Ever since he’d woken up, Hajime felt like he’d been making real progress toward seeing the other’s true self. His crying and his surprise made him feel more...human.

The next thing he knew, his ears were ringing, and he was sprawled on the floor. The side of his head hurt like hell. He recalled hearing a slight whirring noise and then—pain. Had he been punched? By Nagito? By that metal arm? Guess it wasn’t enough to get hurt in his dreams.

Footsteps rang out across the library, and Hajime saw Nagito running toward the doorway. He lunged for him, managing to grab both of his legs. Nagito toppled over. Hajime’s arm complained when it banged against the ground, but he ignored it, seizing the few seconds while the other boy was still dazed to climb on top of him.

“NO!” Nagito shrieked, bucking his hips wildly. Hajime nearly fell off. He didn’t want to hurt him, but...using all his weight, he forced Nagito back to the floor.

“Listen,” he hissed in his ear, “I don’t want to hurt you, so just—stop!”

Nagito suddenly lay very still. For the few seconds, the only sound was the two of them panting. Hajime wanted to wipe the sweat off his forehead, but he didn’t dare release his grip on Nagito’s arm. “If I get off you, will you listen to me?” Trying to sound stern proved incredibly difficult when he was still gasping.

“You’re going to die if you stay here,” Nagito said.

Huh? “What does that mean? You’re going to kill me?”

“Yes.”

The simple earnestness of his response left Hajime speechless. This wasn’t like Nagito at all. “You...you would rather kill me than let me help you?”

“Rather? What rather? It doesn’t matter. You can’t help me.” Nagito’s words pierced him like icicles.

“I can if you would just let me!”

Another bitter laughed clawed at his ears. “If I let you? Is it your job to fix me, Hinata-kun? Am I
an object? A caged animal for you to help? A project for you to work on? Or is that just no more than trash like me deserves? Really, now. I’m disappointed. There you go again. Some things never change, Hinata-kun. Your hope is too weak to bring you any answers on your own, so once again, all you can do is stand there.”

“Too weak?” Would Nagito still say that if he slammed his head against the floor a few times? What – what was that? He wouldn’t do that. “I beat you before, didn’t I?”

“What, my trial? Hahahahaha! You mean when I left that aluminium seal under my bed rather than wrapping it in toilet paper and sticking it in the trash? When I left that bottle of poison in my refrigerator rather than the one in the pharmacy or the beach house? When I deliberately left you Monomi’s giant pink box with her diary so you would have a chance to find the traitor? I did all of that for you, and you think you beat me? Hahahaha! Are you stupid, Hinata-kun?”

Hajime barely recognized the boy pinned beneath him. This wasn’t the same Nagito from the game, but something told him this wasn’t the same Nagito who’d been influenced by Junko either.

“Besides,” Nagito said, “you shouldn’t look at me as someone with strong hope. I’m ultimately worthless, so overcoming me means nothing.”

“Why are you…saying that?”

Nagito twisted. Unprepared for the sudden movement, Hajime tumbled onto his side. He rolled over onto his back just as Nagito leapt on top of him. His eyes shone brightly with the same crude mixture of hope and despair, only this time, there looked to be something else mixed in as well, something Hajime couldn’t quite place. The sickly boy proved surprisingly strong. A bony knee plunged into Hajime’s stomach, and his gaze rolled back in time to see Nagito’s metal fist descending toward his face, as if to pulverize it. He shut his eyes.

A second passed, and then another, and still no avalanche of pain buried him. He hadn’t even heard the harsh slap of metal against flesh. Confused, he opened his eyes.

The metal fist hovered a centimetre above his face. It hung there, as if frozen in time. Beyond it came that pale and lanky arm. He kept looking, and his eyes met Nagito’s. The mania had completely drained away, leaving behind the most vulnerable, frightened expression Hajime had ever seen. The metal arm drooped lifelessly to the floor.

A primal scream exploded out of Nagito. A keening wail cried in a universal tongue. A sound so pitiful and mournful, so human and not, that it defied description. In the back of his brain, Hajime, or maybe Izuru, wondered if that was the most genuine sound Nagito had ever made.

The white-haired boy collapsed on top of Hajime. Wet tears, not his own, dropped onto Hajime’s cheeks. Nagito’s eyes had slid shut, and with their bodies pressed against each other like this, Hajime felt every beat of the other’s heart.

“Nagito. Hey, Nagito. Are you okay? Can you hear me?” Nagito didn’t respond. As gently as he could, Hajime slid out from under him. His legs shook so badly that he had to use a nearby table to help him stand. Nagito lay at his feet, unmoving, save for the quiet rising and falling of his chest. Hajime ran a hand through his hair. What now?

“OI!” The shout came from outside the library. A minute later, Akane rushed in. “What was that — her jaw dropped. “Haji! What happened? Were you and Nagi fighting? Looks like you beat him too. Nice going! I didn’t think you had it in you.”
“Akane….” Hajime trailed off. “It’s not like that. Look, can you – can you help me? I want to get Nagito back to my cottage, but I can’t carry him that far on my own.”

“I got it.” Akane scooped Nagito up so that she was carrying him bridal style. Hajime had fully intended to help her, but it seemed that wouldn’t be necessary. It was easy to forget how strong Akane was. “I was out here lookin’ for a good spot to spar with Coach Nekomaru,” she explained as they left the library. “Then I heard someone screamin’ and I rushed over.”

“It’s a good thing you did,” Hajime said. “Thanks, Akane.”

“Don’t mention it,” she grinned. “Though I wish he was a bit heavier so this felt more like a workout. He’s so skinny. Oh, I know! How about I carry both of ya?”

“No, that’s okay,” Hajime said quickly.

“Come on! I’ll letcha cop a feel!”

“No, really. I’m fine.” Having a conversation like this felt incredibly surreal after what had just happened in the library, but he was pretty sure that he was awake.

“Suit yourself,” Akane shrugged. “I’ll work up an appetite either way.”

“Hey, Akane?” Now that they were together, he figured he might as well ask. “Why is beating Nekomaru so important to you anyway?”

“Hmm.” She smacked her lips together. “It’s not just about beating him. It’s more like…I just gotta know I’m strong enough to handle whatever life throws at me, ya know?”

What was she, a Shounen manga protagonist? “Yeah, I know.”

“And Coach Nekomaru’s done a lot for me. Both at Hope’s Peak and on the island. I never met anyone like him before Hope’s Peak. There was always a bunch of guys askin’ me to do weird things, and I didn’t mind it, so long as they left my siblings alone.” As she spoke, her tone had grown steadily lower and softer. “Hajime, I’m really glad he’s back. He might be all I have left.”

“A-Akane.” Hearing her say all that awakened a powerful sense of guilt within him. It was easy to think of her as a less-than-intelligent with a large physique and a larger appetite but she had the same hopes and fears as the rest of them. And it wasn’t just her. What about the rest of their families and friends? A trapdoor opened in his stomach as he realized he hadn’t even thought about his parents once this entire time. He had no way of knowing whether they were dead or alive. It must have been the same with Akane.

“Hey, Akane,” he said, channelling all his effort into sounding reassuring. “You’ve got all of us too, you know. Don’t forget that. We all need to look out for each other.” He wanted to go a step further and tell her that her family might still be alive, but his mouth wouldn’t allow him to say that for the same reason he couldn’t say it about his own family. Because deep down, in a dark corner of his heart that he wished belonged to Izuru, he knew they were all dead. There was no way Junko would have left them that hope.

“Thank you, Hajime,” Akane said quietly. Hajime was just thankful that this time, she didn’t offer him her body.

As they entered Hajime’s cottage and placed Nagito on the bed, Hajime made his decision.

“Akane, can you find the others and ask them to come here as soon as possible?”
“Mmmm. Yeah! Leave it to me.” She dashed out of the cottage. Hajime shook his head in amazement. It was nice not having to explain himself for once. A glance down at Nagito crushed that thought. It would be nice if he did explain himself for once.

A strand of white hair wilted toward Nagito’s nose. Hajime gently tucked it back behind his ear. “I don’t understand you,” he told the sleeping form. “I don’t know what’s truth and what’s fiction. I don’t know what you actually believe and what you only delude yourself into believing. But in that way, I do understand you. Because I’ve been doing something very similar.” He took a deep breath. “Nagito, I’m scared of you. I don’t know what you’re going to do or even what you want to do. And while I really do believe that, I also tricked myself into thinking that there wasn’t anything else. That it was that simple. This is where you would mock me and say, ‘so that’s the extent of your hope.’ And back then, it was. But not now. Not anymore. Now I truly want to understand you. Not just that, I want you to understand me. How does that sound, Nagito?”

Of course, the other didn’t answer. Hajime moved away from the bed. Izuru?

…

Izuru, I’m going to tell the others about us now. Is that okay?

…

Can I take your silence as a yes?

…

Okay then.

Opening his cottage door, Hajime stepped into the sunlight.

Number of Students: 15

Chapter End Notes

So I basically have a headcanon where all of these kids would definitely be playing Mario Kart together in another life or time (a la the 2nd episode of the Despair Arc). While the opening here is fluffy, it isn't filler.

The next chapter is a Sonia POV, and it'll be pretty short. Sorry. I think it'll be difficult to keep cranking out chapters at the rate I have been for the next few weeks, but I'll try my best.

Also, also, for my next story, I'm torn between two ideas. I want to do either a high school AU with the 77th and 78th class (no despair) or an Ultra Despair Girls AU where Komaru Naegi becomes the Successor to Enoshima Junko, and the Remnants of Despair flock around her to fight the Future Foundation and the 78th class. Of course, both would feature Komahina, because Komahina is my life. Do you guys have any preference?

And my usual spiel to end on - if there's anything you liked, anything you think I could improve on, or anything you'd want to see in the future, feel free to let me know. Thank you for reading, and enjoy this latest update!
Sonia applauded as Mirage Golden Hawk Jum-P lived up to its name by landing perfectly on her shoulder. The little hamster chittered in her ear, and she laughed. “Amazing, Gundham! Your subordinates are remarkable!”

With the other three Dark Devas of Destruction gathered around a small dish of sunflower seeds, Gundham was free to conceal his face behind his scarf. “Thank you.” Sonia laughed again. He was irresistibly cute whenever he did that, but seeing his blush or his heartwarming smile was even cuter. Sonia prided herself on being able to elicit either reaction from him. Especially since she thought she had lost him once. Never again.

“Gundham! As the Supreme Overlord of Ice, you must not conceal your face. You must look out with pride, so your enemies may tremble while you laugh.”

The scarf receded back to his shoulders. “Fuhahahaha! You have spoken wisely, my Dark Princess. Truly, bearing your identity before others is a mark of great courage. With you by my side, there is nothing, and no one, capable of challenging our dominion.”

“Indubitably,” Sonia cheered. She curled into his side and let her head rest on his shoulder. The edges of the scarf tickled her nose. She had done this often enough that he no longer stiffened in surprise. Instead he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her even closer. Sonia sighed happily. She wished she could do things like this in her own country. But all the traditions and restrictions that came with royalty – all of that prevented her from doing what she wanted. Some of her classmates had called her a Disney princess, which might have been a compliment, but she was not entirely sure. Gundham had enjoyed the term. He had said most Disney movies provided an adequate introduction to the art of forming contracts with mystical creatures. After hearing that, Sonia had resolved to start watching those movies the moment she left the island.

“Gundham,” she said, unable to put that idea out of her head, “have you thought about returning home at all?” She already knew her own answer. After everything she had done while in despair, it seemed unlikely that she even had a kingdom to go back to. Part of her wanted to believe otherwise, but at the same time, it felt like the cost of believing had grown higher and higher. None of them would ever kill their friends. There was no traitor. She was a good person. All of those beliefs had been cruelly destroyed. All that left her with was despair. But then there was Hajime…and all of their friends had returned to them…and when that happened, Sonia resolved to learn from the mistakes of her past. That was what it meant to grow.

“A house consumed by the flames of hell offers little comfort,” Gundham answered.

Sonia thought back for a moment to remember what she had asked. “I agree with that, but I just cannot stop wondering. Is it really okay for us to stay on this island forever?”

“Our souls cannot be bound here for eternity. We are destined for something far greater than mortal minds can comprehend. The entire world shall cower at our names!” That was not the most diplomatic phrasing. Actually, it was not at all diplomatic. The nobles back home would have been horrified. Even so, she found it charming. Or perhaps that was exactly why she found it charming. Still, she would have to ask Hajime how he expected them to redeem themselves if they never left the island. Surely there had to be something they could do. It was that belief that had given her
new hope.

Mirage Golden Hawk Jum-P dove off her shoulder and raced to the dish of seeds. Sonia glanced sideways at Gundham. He looked so happy watching the Four Dark Devas of Destruction that it was impossible not to partake in his merriment. She loved this side of him.

A banging on the door disrupted her thoughts. Hopefully it was not Kazuichi. Dealing with him was a most tiresome experience. Fixing her dress to look a bit more proper, Sonia pasted a smile onto her face and opened the door. “May I help you?”

“Hey.” Akane stood there. Or…jogged there. Yes, she was definitely jogging in place. She always did have the most energy. “Hajime wanted me to tell everyone to meet him outside his cottage.”

“Could it be?” Gundham gasped. “Has he finally learned to summon the Repressed Demon Lord?”

“Um.” Akane made a face. “I don’t really get it, but I’m just lettin’ everyone know.”

“Thank you, Akane.” Sonia’s smile came naturally this time. Akane had always had an earnestness to her that Sonia could not help but appreciate. That kind of life held an undeniable attraction in its simplicity. Furthermore, she could eat all the cake she wanted. Surely that was worth something. “We will be there.”

“Great!” Akane ran to the next cottage.

Sonia watched Gundham gather his followers and coax them back inside his scarf. Straightening up, he folded his arms and nodded. “His magical art is still incomplete. However, it is not in my nature to shy away. I cannot defile the name of the Tanaka Empire! Let us face his challenge directly.”

“Perhaps when it is done, we can look around for a wheel for the Four Dark Devas of Destruction to use as a training ground,” Sonia offered. Watching the furry creatures scamper around filled her with almost as much delight as watching a horror movie or reading an occult magazine. Adorably, Gundham was easily frightened by scary movies. He’d flinch at every jump scare and she would wind her fingers through his hair and kiss his cheek. Being with him made watching those kinds of movies even more fun than it had been back home. If it were not for this experience, she never would have learned that.

And then she had done her best to turn the entire world into a horror movie.

“An ordinary wheel would not suffice,” Gundham mused. “It would decay or burn the moment my subordinates touched it.”

“An infernal wheel then,” Sonia decided.

“Fuhahaha! Does such an artifact even exist on this island?”

“We will find one,” Sonia said. “I am certain of it.”

“Very well,” Gundham nodded. “Since you also possess the All-Seeing Eye, I cannot dismiss your words. Now, let us journey to the others!”

The sunlight streamed brightly through the air as they walked to Hajime’s cottage. Not for the first time, Sonia thanked the powers-that-be that the marketplace had retained a stock of sunscreen. Her kingdom was frequently visited by clouds or rain, and the sun was weak, so she had never worried about burning. Jabberwock Island proved to be very different. It had not rained even once since
they had arrived. Granted, it had only been about a week, but she could not recall it ever raining in
the simulation either. That might have been because of programming. Even so, she had never
thought she would miss the rain so much.

Hajime stood outside his door with his back pressed against it. He waved, or at least held up a
hand, upon seeing them. Twogami stood before them on the walkway. He folded his arms as a
greeting. “Humph. It baffles me how all you skinny types can still be so slow.”

“I carry the weight of the Netherworld, fiend,” Gundham replied.

“Iajime chose an awkward meeting spot,” Twogami proceeded as if Hajime could not hear and
Gundham had not spoken at all. “This walkway is too narrow for all of us to stand comfortably.”

“I don’t mind,” Teruteru said. “Being pressed up against each other is a great way to develop
intimacy. Or so I hear. Hmhmhm!”

“Ugh. You seriously need to cut that out,” Mahiru groaned. Hiyoko grabbed her hand and laughed.

Sonia glanced around. “Where is everyone else?”

“HELLOOOOO!” Ibuki’s cheerful cry lunged at everyone in a verbal hug. She ran up the
boardwalk, dragging Mikan along behind her. “Ibuki’s here now! Mikan-chan was fretting over
Nagito-chan’s health, so Ibuki-chan had to bring her along!” Sonia’s head buzzed with all the
honorifics. But she would never ask Ibuki to stop. Secretly, she enjoyed being referred to as
‘Sonia-chan.’

“Severing a limb without the Orb of Regeneration.” Gundham glared at the cottage door. “I admire
his courage, at least.”

“I hope he will be alright,” Sonia said, and she looked at Hajime so that he knew she meant it too.
She had thought a lot about Nagito since learning the truth about her identity. She did not think she
could have done what he did, but for the first time, she felt like she understood why he had done it.
He had not been crazy after all—at least, no crazier than the rest of them. She just wished he had
talked to them about it. Maybe if he had explained things, they could have found a better solution
together. At the very least, Chiaki or Hajime might have known what to do. At the same time, she
found herself unable to blame Nagito completely. None of them had ever done anything to make
him feel like he could tell them. They had been afraid, so they had pushed him away and treated
him like a monster. As the Ultimate Princess, Sonia could not forgive herself for that. If only she
had made more of an effort. If only….\n
Gundham led her back to reality by placing a hand on her arm. “Do not worry,” he whispered. “We
shall do better this time.” It was as if he had somehow managed to read her thoughts. Sonia smiled.
He was right.

Hajime leaned back, using the door to keep him standing. His eyes met hers, and they traded
smiles. While she had been busy thinking, Nekomaru, Fuyuhiko, Peko, and Kazuichi had appeared.
Suddenly Sonia appreciated the cramped space offered by the boardwalk. It made it impossible for
Kazuichi to approach her. She did not hate him, but she wished he would stop treating her like an
object, like she was a product of her social standing. The affection he showed her was the same
affection he would give to any European princess. Because of that, it felt hollow, even servile, and
Sonia did not want more servants. She did not even want to feel like a princess. She wanted…
friends.

Once Akane rushed over, Hajime cleared his throat. “Is everyone here?”
“Yes,” Teruteru answered.

“Hold on a minute.” Sonia scanned the small crowd again. “What about Nagito?”

“He’s…” Hajime’s face embarked on a strange gymnastics routine, shifting through several expressions. “He’s recovering in my cottage right now. I’ll talk to him after this.”

“So?” Hiyoko questioned. “Tell us why we’re here so you can back to making out with your boyfriend.”

At her words, Hajime’s face turned a shade of red Sonia would not have imagined possible.

“Make out?” Teruteru stroked his chin. “If anyone’s making out, it’s—”


Hajime continued sputtering. “I-I’m not—”

“Kazuichi!” Sonia amplified her voice. “You should not mock our friend’s sexual orientation like that. There is nothing wrong with being gay.”

Despite his blush, Hajime managed to repair his mouth. “I’m not gay, I’m bi.” The red on his cheeks deepened. “Wait, that isn’t what I wanted to—”

“Oh?” Teruteru tried to approach him, but the crowd of bodies prevented it. “Then I have a shot? Is that what you’re saying?”

“You don’t even have a shot with yourself,” Hiyoko laughed.

“Everybody shut the fuck up!” Fuyuhiko’s shout plunged the others into silence. The yakuza nodded at Hajime. “Go ahead.”

Hajime looked like he wanted to sink through the ground and disappear. Sonia sympathized with that sentiment; she had felt the same way upon learning that Monokuma’s monitors were broadcasting her actions to the Future Foundation. “Y-yeah.” Hajime coughed. “Thanks, Fuyuhiko.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Anyway.” He took a deep breath. “There’s something I need to tell all of you. Those of us who… beat Junko’s killing game already know this, but the rest of you….” Sonia understood immediately. She took Gundham’s hand and hoped he would not react badly. Surely not. No matter what Izuru had done, Hajime was their friend. The least they could do was believe in him.

“I’m not really good with words,” Hajime continued, “so I’m just going to say it. I am Hajime Hinata, but I’m also Izuru Kamukura.”

“Izuru Kamukura?” Teruteru gasped.

“That name sounds familiar,” Twogami muttered.

“Wasn’t he the founder of Hope’s Peak?” Mahiru set a finger against her head as she thought. “He was that genius called the Ultimate Hope, right?”

“You all know that I was a…a Reserve Course student.” The brief pause made Sonia want to hug him. “And I admired Hope’s Peak Academy so much that I would do anything to stay there.
Including agreeing to the Izuru Kamukura Project.”

As Hajime explained, Sonia’s thought began to drift. She knew she should pay attention to what her friend was saying, but at the same time, she could not stop wondering what she would have done. What if she had been talentless? Perhaps that would have been better. It was not like her talent was anything impressive. She had done nothing to earn it, and she could not use it to do anything amazing either. It was that feeling which drove her to sympathize with Nagito. Like him, Sonia hated her talent. It pushed her back into a world she despised, a world with predetermined rules and norms she could not violate. That world did not allow her to want or to desire. She could not enjoy watching scary movies or reading occult magazines. She could not make friends, since no one in the kingdom matched both her age and her standing. And she certainly could not form a relationship of her own. Certainly not with a man like Gundham. She would never become Queen if she broke from her role.

And Sonia desperately wanted to become Queen. As Queen, she would have real power. She could change all those rules and restrictions so that people would have the freedom to live as they pleased and do as they liked.

She held in a sigh. None of it mattered anymore. It had been a silly dream, that was all. A fancy, floating on the wind. Now she was awake.

When her talent had offered her the chance to attend Hope’s Peak Academy in Japan, Sonia had seen that as an opportunity to escape her gilded cage and begin anew. Her lineage would not matter there. She would be free to make her own friends and pursue her own interests and eat all the cake she wanted. She would experience the kind of life she had always longed for. It had been the first time in her life that she allowed herself to imagine that her talent might be worth something.

And as a result, she destroyed her nation with despair.

Pressure built around her hand, and she saw Gundham smile. She squeezed his hand back.

“So this Izuru is in your head now?” Nekomaru’s question thundered through the crowd. “He can hear everything we’re saying?”

“Yeah. I-I think so. It’s difficult to explain it.”

“Hey, bastards!” Sonia did not know how Fuyuhiko accomplished it, but he had managed to slink through the other students to stand next to Hajime. “It’s important to remember that this is the same Hajime we knew in the game. He’s not some crazy nutcase who would try to hurt any of us. He’s…he’s our friend.” His efforts to hide his reddening face by looking away made Sonia want to pinch his cheeks.

Hajime was also blushing. “Thanks, Fuyuhiko.” Sonia glanced at Gundham, but for once, she found his face completely unreadable. She wanted to ask what he was thinking, but she could not interrupt the others now. Most of them had gone quiet after hearing Hajime speak. If they rejected him now—

“Awww.” Hiyoko pouted. “So Hajime’s a talented super-genius? I guess that means I can’t make fun of him anymore.” Her backhanded acceptance triggered the others, and soon everyone was assuring Hajime that this would not change the way they viewed him.

Sonia allowed herself a quick sigh of relief. After everything that had happened, it was nice to see
everyone finally getting along. Maybe things were not perfect yet, but seeing everyone like this, Sonia could believe that they would be. No, they had to be.

“I’m hungry,” Akane declared. “No one’s had any breakfast yet, right? So let’s go eat already.”

“Food is indeed necessary to keep up your strength,” Nekomaru said. “Very well. LET’S EAT!”

“Amen.” Twogami followed after them. Slowly but surely, the others made their way to the restaurant. The boardwalk grew emptier and emptier until Sonia, Gundham, and Hajime were the only ones left.

Gundham looked to be lost in thought, so Sonia approached the other boy first. “Hajime, are you alright?”

He met her gaze. “I think so. Thanks, Sonia. I didn’t know how the others would respond.”

“Do not doubt your friends, Hajime!” Sonia’s heart swelled with her exclamation. “You are our leader now, but that does not mean you must face everything alone. All of us are willing to help you as well. You must never forget that!”

He blinked a few times. “S-Sonia.”

Taking his hand between both of her own, Sonia nodded. She wanted to do more than say it. She wanted him to feel her resolve. They stared at each other. After a moment, he nodded back.

Gundham laid a hand on her shoulder. “She speaks truthfully,” he mused. “Should you require our aid in battle, simply sound the Horn of Recalling, and we shall assist you.”

Hajime nodded again. “Thank you.”

The seriousness of the atmosphere made Sonia wish Ibuki were present. “Hajime, are you not coming to eat with us?”

He glanced back at his cottage and shook his head. “I want to be here when Nagito wakes up.”

“Do you seek to break his curse of misfortune?” Gundham held out his arms as if defending himself. “Your magic essence is far too low to guarantee success. However, since it is you, perhaps it is not impossible.”

Sonia grabbed his hand and turned back to Hajime. “Can we bring you and Nagito something from the restaurant then? Does he have any particular tastes?”

“Well.” Hajime smiled at the ground. “He doesn’t like rice.” A Japanese person disliking rice! Inconceivable! Perhaps Nagito really was crazy.

“We’ll bring you both something good,” Sonia promised. “But make sure he eats, okay? He needs to keep up his strength if he wants to recover. And I want him to recover.” She became abruptly aware of both men staring at her. “Is that strange?”

“No,” Hajime said. “I want him to get better too. It’s just that…I’m glad I’m not the only one who cares about him.” He met her gaze. “When he gets better, will you help me with him?”

“Of course!” Sonia held out her free hand, and they shook on it.

“The Demon Realm has blessed this contract,” Gundham said. “Now it must come true.”
“Thank you,” Hajime said. “Both of you.”

As the two of them left and approached the restaurant, Gundham stopped. “Didn’t you wish to inquire about leaving this island?”

“No.” Sonia threw her head back and let the wind race through her hair. “I trust Hajime to decide the best time.” She smiled at Gundham. “Let us go. We have a wheel to find.”

Number of Students: 15

Chapter End Notes

So...can we talk about how the Nagito OVA trailer is either super OOC or it wastes time on a dream instead of clearing up all the loose ends left by the Kibou-arc? Can we ALSO talk about how the "Destroyer of the World" could refer to Hinata/Kamukura destroying the virtual world trapping Nagito and saving him, meaning the title of the OVA is essentially: Nagito Komaeda and Hajime Hinata.

I'm so nervous about this, guys. I really am.

Anyway. I'm still super busy over the next two weeks, so enjoy this light chapter. As always, thank you for reading! If you liked anything, want me to improve on anything, or have anything you want to see, feel free to let me know. You're all awesome, and I hope you have a fantastic day!
Closing the door to his cottage resulted in a much darker room than he had expected. Hajime opened the blinds without raising them. That way, the light would be too weak to disturb Nagito, yet strong enough that Hajime could navigate without stubbing his toe or something. Since it looked like Nagito wouldn’t be waking up anytime soon, he had some time on his hands. Setting down the plate of toast Sonia had brought for them—no butter, unfortunately—Hajime made his way into the bathroom. Leaving his clothes in a messy heap on the floor, he stepped into the shower.

The hot water pouring over his body was a godsend. It had been way too long since he’d last showered, but he’d been so preoccupied with everything that he hadn’t noticed it until recently. Thankfully, the Future Foundation had set up working water as well as electricity. He had a vague memory of Kazuichi being surprised after hearing that from Mahiru and Hiyoko, but Hajime was too tired to even pretend to feel sceptical about it. Besides, he had larger issues on his mind.

Izuru? Are you there? I want to talk to you.

…

I told everyone about you now. You probably knew that already. I’m not sorry, exactly, but…I couldn’t keep lying to them by hiding this. Not just because that would be wrong, but because it would be easy. Too easy.

When Izuru still failed to respond, Hajime began shampooing his hair. Despite the hot water, he shivered at the thought of having to clean hair as long as Izuru’s had been.

Does such pettiness really occupy your thoughts?

He paused in the middle of scrubbing his scalp. Izuru?

Obviously.

I thought you were ignoring me. Why wouldn’t you answer earlier?

What do you want?

His curtness irritated Hajime. He really hoped others didn’t think of him like that. He knew he could be blunt, but he wasn’t an asshole. Probably.

I can hear your thoughts, you know.

I know.

For a second, he thought he detected the faintest whiff of amusement, but it vanished before he could be certain.

People are not usually so rude to me. Especially when they lack talent.

I have all of your talents now. Anyway, that’s not what’s important right now. I wanted to ask you about the timers on the pods.
You could ask Nagito.

Hajime leaned back and let the water course through his hair and down the back of his neck. It was probably pointless to hide anything from the other. How could you keep secrets from someone inside your own head? Then again, Izuru had done a pretty good job of that so far.

I doubt he would tell me, Hajime admitted.

I set the timers to wake up your friends because them being awake was slightly less boring than the alternative.

Did you do that before we entered the simulation?

No.

Hajime paused. Then…that would mean—would mean that you….

When you sleep, your consciousness weakens enough for me to take control of your body.

Then, every time I’ve been asleep, you—

Correct. While you rested as Naegi, Kirigiri, and Togami brought us to this island, I went around to each of the pods and modified them so they would awaken your friends at certain intervals. The ones who died earlier awakened faster because it was easier for me to re-compile the data acquired by their avatars.

If that’s true, then what have you been doing on the island?

Nothing. Which, I admit, is boring. I suppose you could say I’ve been thinking. Occasionally I’ve even been visited.

Visited? By Nagito? That realization struck Hajime over the head. That’s why he was in my room that night! So that’s when he found out!

Actually, he’d come to see you. My being there surprised him, though I cannot say the sa—

Izuru’s voice cut off abruptly as Hajime’s foot slipped on the wet tiles. He toppled over. For an instant, he felt the strange sensation of water sprinkling down over his entire body. Then it stopped. Everything stopped. Before he even had time to wonder what had happened, his senses returned. Once again, he felt the water running over his body. He heard it splashing against the floor. Although the water was mostly hitting his stomach and chest, which seemed strange, since he was pretty sure he’d fallen on them.

If I have to take over your body to save your life, Izuru said, I’d rather not do it in the shower.

Hajime’s head spun. He remembered blacking out for a second and…wait, save my life?

At the angle you were falling, you would have broken your neck and died. Izuru’s dull monotone made for terrible bedside manner. That thought didn’t deter him from continuing. That would have been inconvenient for us. Though mostly for you.

Hajime used to wall to help him stand. He felt remarkably calm for having just survived a near-death experience. He couldn’t shake the image of what an embarrassing class trial that would have been. Would the others even consider an explanation as simple as: the idiot slipped in the shower and died?
Thank you, Izuru. Saying that felt strange, but Hajime decided not to dwell on it. What did you mean when you said my dying wouldn’t inconvenience you? Izuru?

That’s not what I said.

It’s what you meant.

Hajime, why did you agree to become me? Why would you choose to surrender your body, soul, and mind for talent? You must have had some idea that you wouldn’t be the same person at the end of it all, even if you didn’t know about me. So why? I cannot comprehend it.

I’m not sure myself.

So boring. So many people in the world who don’t understand anything. Not even themselves. It would be frustrating if it weren’t so utterly predictable. Nagito made me realize—

Nagito? Why are you bringing him up all of a sudden?

Because after curing him, I—

You cured him?

Your questions are boring. Just listen. I have better things to do than entertain you.

You have nothing else to do, Hajime thought. Still, the hundred other questions that had sprung into his mind slunk away like scolded children. Okay, okay. I’m sorry.

This is important. I don’t have much time—

What? What do you mean?

What did I just say? Izuru’s annoyance stunned Hajime. That was such an…un-Izuru moment. He never showed any emotion. At all. He knew everything, and so everything bored him. Having a being like that sharing his mind was entirely different from actually being the other. If he was going to be honest with himself, as he had resolved to be, he was terrified. He felt like that shadow in his mind could devour him any second. So hearing him sound like this – Hajime didn’t know how to respond.

The truth, Izuru said after a moment, is that I am not Izuru Kamukura. Not completely. I am best referred to as an echo. A ghost partially awakened by you and your actions within the Neo World Program. I am not a complete personality. It is not even correct for me to refer to myself as ‘I’ or ‘me,’ though I do so because language will not permit me to do otherwise. Or I should say it will not permit you to understand otherwise. We do not have a word for someone who is less than whole, but with you, we are more than one anyway. But even that does not matter. Soon I am going to disappear.

D-disappear? Why?

Your body never really belonged to me. Ever since you left the game, I’ve been fading away bit by bit. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that our minds have been slowly melding together. Because I am a shadow of Izuru Kamukura, and you are entirely Hajime Hinata, it will be your consciousness that remains dominant. Of course, you may not be the same person you were before all this happened. Even if all of my influence disappears, which I do not predict, your experiences have helped you to grow and mature. That is the way things are. People grow or fall in predetermined harmony. Ultimately, it is boring, because ultimately, it means nothing. The world
will not change because of the average person’s actions. That would require a Junko Enoshima or Makoto Naegi.

W-what are you—

Others never even reach that point. This feeling of fading away into oblivion...this sense of inevitability...this feeling can be called unimaginable despair. How do you suppose a god would feel if he knew he was going to die and that nothing he could do would prevent it? Ordinary people die all the time. Their despair would be nothing compared to that. Nothing at all.

Hajime’s mind spun. If you believe that, then why did you cure Nagito? Why save everyone else?

When I had complete control over you, I never thought about it. Yours was an existence I considered too insignificant to matter. In the simulation, you saw me and Nagito with Junko’s arm. We were on a ship. At that time, I told Nagito that talentless people contribute nothing to the world. If you were upset by how he reacted to learning you were talentless, though I doubt that was the true source of his bitterness, you would have hated me. I could smell his imminent death even then. It did not interest me. But now, I understand that feeling. As my existences wanes with every passing second, I feel myself sliding toward despair once again. That interested me. Had Junko predicted that? What would I do when faced with death? I thought about that for some time. My own battle between hope and despair. If I sat there waiting, which would emerge triumphant? I wanted to know. And yet, I took action. I saved your friends.

I-Izuru....

The reason I did that...you already know, don’t you, Hajime?

Hajime’s mind was already working overtime to process everything else Izuru had said. It was strange. He wasn’t having as much difficulty understanding as he’d thought. Perhaps that was because, unlike with Nagito, these words were coming from his own mind. He sensed not only the thoughts but the feelings behind them as well.

Chiaki Nanami, he realized.

That’s correct.

If the words had been spoken, they would have sounded monotonous. But Hajime sensed the faintest touches of praise behind them.

However, it is not just Chiaki. It’s you too. If you had lost to Junko, I would have no reason to believe hope could be more unpredictable than despair. But you chose...no, you created a third option. You, a talentless Reserve Course student, proved all of us wrong. Nagito. Junko. Chiaki. Even me. You proved there could be a future with both hope and despair. That, Hajime Hinata, is interesting. I wish I could see it.

Izuru?

...

Izuru? No matter how much he called, the other refused to respond. Yes, refused. He hadn’t disappeared. Hajime could still sense him, huddled in the depths of his mind. But after everything Izuru had said, Hajime didn’t know how to feel about that. This whole time, he’d thought of Izuru Kamukura as a sort of malicious alien, a parasite dwelling in his mind and waiting for an opportunity to usurp control and tear apart his consciousness. But it seemed like that wasn’t the case. While Izuru’s tone and manner of speaking hadn’t changed at all, the words he’d said...
was no way this was the same Izuru who’d uploaded Alter Ego Junko to the New World Program. He, too, had changed with Hajime. Or was it the other way around? How much of Hajime could he really call his own? Izuru had said something about their minds melding. Did that mean he would cease to be Hajime Hinata? He didn’t want that. After everything he’d done to escape Junko’s trap, was he really going to end up like this?

Water continued sliding off his body. He concentrated on the way it pattered against the tiles until his breathing eased. He wasn’t going to disappear. Izuru was. And that was…. He didn’t know what that was. Was he losing part of himself? Becoming someone else? Not dying but changing. Was there even a difference? He thought he’d known what he was getting into by choosing the future. Instead of a path, he chose an endless sea where anything could happen. But this – this was too much.

If you just do it, things will turn out okay. That was what Chiaki had told him. She’d been right too. Chiaki had helped him, and Izuru, and everyone.

“Chiaki,” he moaned. Her name slipped through the steam rising from the shower and disappeared. “Chiaki, I need you. Please.”

The water pelted his skin, each drop a reminder that he was completely and utterly alone. He shut off the shower, grabbed a towel, and scrubbed it over himself, as if the rough feel of the material could chase away the emptiness. Careful not to trip, he eased his way across the bathroom. Something glinted at him in the mirror, but all the steam had fogged up the surface. Hesitantly, he approached it. His hand lifted of its own accord and began wiping the glass.

As his face stared back at him, he watched his mouth fall open. “AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRGH!” The scream floated up through his body and poured out of him. It was like someone had broken the handle of a spigot, and now there was no way to stop the water from gushing out. “AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRGH!”

Glaring at him from the mirror was his own face, only with a single red eye………

Hajime sat up. His heart felt like it was hammering nails in his chest. He was on his couch in his cottage. He raised his hands. They looked normal. No red, no claws, nothing like that. Had he been dreaming again? But he was still naked, saved for towel wrapped around his waist. The tray of toast sat nearby, and Nagito was in his bed, and —

“What the hell?” He hadn’t meant to scream, but he hadn’t expected to see Twogami and Mikan in his room either.

“EEEEEEEEEK!” Mikan jumped back. “Uh, uh, I’m sorry!”

“M-Mikan!” Hajime started to pull the towel up to cover his chest but thought better of it. “And Twogami! What are you two doing here?”

As Mikan continued whimpering in the corner, Twogami spoke up. “I was passing by your cottage when I heard a scream. I entered it to find you unconscious in the bathroom. So I went to find Tsumiki-san. We moved you to the couch, and we discussing what to do next when you awoke.”


His heart fell thirty meters when he heard that. So it hadn’t been a dream. He really had a red eye
now. Izuru’s eye.

“Hajime.” The Ultimate Imposter’s face was an unreadable mask. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Hajime answered half-truthfully. He no longer knew what ‘I’ meant. If he was some combination of himself and Izuru, then who was he? What did it mean to be Hajime if part of him was someone else? “No. Not really. I…I don’t know.”

“Are you feeling ill, Hinata-kun?” Mikan stood over him. She didn’t have any shots yet, but the look on her face told him it wouldn’t be much longer before she brought them out.

“No,” he said quickly. “Not ill, exactly. Definitely not.” He sighed. “It’s more like…Izuru just gave me a lot to think about.” In light of that, having mismatched eyes was the least of his troubles.

“Having presented the truth to us like you did, I’m not surprised that he wanted revenge,” Twogami nodded. “You don’t have to listen to anything he says.” He was doing a remarkable job of ignoring the glowing red eye.

Hajime bit his tongue. They didn’t understand. Well, of course they didn’t. How could they? He didn’t even understand. It was just so much to think about. Izuru, Nagito, Chiaki, the Future Foundation, Naegi, the world – all of it swirled around and around in his head. A deep sense of shame gnawed at his chest. There was so much going on. All of their—his—friends were fighting their own battles, and here he was, throwing himself a self-pity party.

“Twogami-kun,” the quiet voice rasped from the corner. Nagito had propped himself up on his elbows and was wearing his favorite false smile. “I wonder if that’s true.”

“K-Komaeda-kun!” Mikan yelled before anyone else could respond. “You’re awake! How are you feeling? How’s your arm?”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” Nagito was still smiling. “The arm seems to be working fine. I expected nothing less from the Ultimate Mechanic. His skills are truly amazing! I’m so happy that he would use them for someone like me.”

“Nagito.” Twogami’s voice fell like an iron weight. “What did you mean?”

“Ah, that.” Nagito glanced down at Hajime’s blanket. “I don’t have any place to say this, but I don’t think Kamukura-kun was trying to deceive Hinata-kun.”

“W-what would you know?” Hajime demanded. As he said it, he remembered hearing that Izuru and Nagito had shared several conversations. “Sorry,” he tacked on before Nagito could insult himself again. “I’m just…stressed right now.”

“Hajime,” Twogami said. “I am not going to order you to talk. But if you choose to, I would be happy to listen. You were willing to listen to me talk about my past. So this is the least I can do to repay you.”

“How very like the Ultimate Affluent Progeny to despise being in another’s debt!” If he hadn’t known better, Hajime would have labelled Nagito’s praise as sarcasm. “Truly you imitate him well.”
“It’s n-n-not just that,” Mikan managed. “I would l-listen too. B-because Hinata-kun is kind.”
Hajime felt fairly confident that he’d started blushing at her words, and he looked away.

Twogami-kun ignored this. “Nagito, I would like to talk with you as well.”

“I feel so lucky!” Nagito wrapped his arms around himself. The mechanical arm seemed to respond easily to the movement. “Hinata-kun and Twogami-kun both want to interact with trash like me.’
Something in his face changed when he glanced back up. “Twogami-kun, I would be happy to talk with you.”

Hajime picked up on the snub. A deep sense of hurt spread through his body. Why? Why was Nagito acting like this? It was the same as always. Just when he thought he was making progress—

You’re going to die if you stay here. Nagito’s threat from earlier replayed in his mind. On the beach, he’d admitted that he had no plans to kill Twogami. He’d been trying to get himself killed because—because why? Hadn’t it been to become the foundation for a twisted hope? Was that not it? No way. That was definitely it. But…was that all? Knowing Nagito, there had to be more than that. There always was.

“Hinata-kun,” Mikan said. “Y-you’re spacing out. You sh-should rest, and w-we can come back l-later. Aaaah! Not that y-you actually want us t-t-to come back!”

“No,” Hajime said. To hell with it. Unlike someone present, he didn’t take any joy in being an enigma. So he told them everything Izuru had said. About the pods. About disappearing. Even about the embarrassing, near-fatal accident in the shower. For some reason, his gaze kept returning to Nagito as he spoke. When he mentioned how he’d nearly broken his neck. Nagito had momentarily stiffened. Of course, that was nothing next to Mikan’s shriek.

At last, he fell silent, and a heavy silence wafted through the room. The fingers on Nagito’s metal hand kept opening and closing. Mikan had covered her mouth, and it looked like she was trying very hard not to cry.

Twogami gazed at him unflinchingly. “Hajime, I’m going to say to you what you once said to me. The only Hajime Hinata I know is the one right here in front of me. No matter what else happens, I won’t forget that. Neither should you. My entire life, I’ve lived with the fear that no one would acknowledge my existence. How could they, when all I showed them was the shadow of another? Look at me.”

Hajime complied. When he did so, he looked into his own face. W-what the heck? There was no mistaking it. That was definitely a larger version of himself.

“On this island, you were the one who taught me that I could be myself. I did not have to live in the shadows forever. And Mikan.”

“M-m-me?”

“Don’t be afraid. You helped me discover that same truth back at Hope’s Peak Academy. After all, you were the one I trusted to care for the real Ryota. You were the one I told.”

“Eeeeeeex!” Mikan sniffed. “You’re being s-so nice, Twogami-kun.”

“Hardly,” he said flatly. “This is how you deserve to be treated.” When he turned back to Hajime, his features had reverted to Byakuya Togami’s. “Listen to me, Hajime. Kamukura, you listen too. Only one person in this world has the right to define your identity. Yourself. In this world, there are people who will accept that and people who won’t. Everyone on this island is the former.”
“What are you—?” Hajime couldn’t finish the question. Despite the depth of this conversation, he felt like he knew, at least partially, what Twogami meant.

“It’s okay to not know who you are. Most people spend their whole lives trying to answer that question. Some never find out, and so they delude themselves into thinking they already know. Even if you don’t know now, I am confident you will figure it out. And all of us will gladly support you.”

“T-Twogami.” A powerful feeling of warmth rushed through him. He couldn’t believe he’d once thought of this guy as a cold, narcissistic jerk. Even after meeting the real Togami, Hajime hadn’t thought much about the Ultimate Imposter. He hadn’t thought much about any of the others. Chiaki had sacrificed herself to save everyone, and now, all he was doing was worrying about his own weaknesses. Well no more. “Thank you.”

“There is no need to thank me. I was simply repaying a favor. But you’re welcome.”

“Magnificent, Twogami-kun!” Nagito’s cry perverted the moment. “What an uplifting speech! So full of hope and beauty—truly you are an Ultimate.”

“Nagito, can you stand?” Twogami asked.

“If that would please you.”

“No!” Mikan shouted, suddenly very forceful. “Komaeda-kun needs to rest.”

“That’s probably true,” Hajime agreed. “And I want to talk to him too, so I don’t want him going anywhere.” Not to mention that, as much as Nagito scared him, he felt safer when he knew where the other was.

“Humph.” Twogami adjusted his glasses. “Very well. It’s probably better if you hear this too, actually.”

“Oh!” Mikan jumped up. “I c-can l-leave.”

“If you like,” Twogami replied. “Of course, you’re free to stay as well.”

To Hajime’s surprise, it wasn’t him that Mikan turned to. It was Nagito. “Komaeda-kun….”

“I wouldn’t dream of telling an Ultimate like yourself what to do, Tsumiki-kun!”

“Nagito.” Hajime tried to sound stern without sounding sharp. He failed.

“You can stay,” Nagito said without looking at anyone. Mikan sat on the ground by the couch. Hajime could reach out and touch her hair. Akane had done her best with trimming it, but the locks were still an uneven mess. They resembled a knot of wires or cables. Idly, he wondered if there was a hairbrush in the market. His ahoge was beyond saving, but maybe Mikan’s hair wasn’t.

“I’ve been told about everything that happened in the game,” Twogami said. “And of course, I also have my memories of my time as Ultimate Despair. I can only imagine how painful that truth must have been for you especially. I never really understood you. The way you acted in the restaurant after the drawing – as I look back on it, I wonder how I didn’t notice then.”

“When I put on the night-vision goggles and saw you, and when I saw the knife, I wasn’t angry. Does that sound strange? Perhaps it does, but nonetheless, it’s the truth. I really wasn’t angry. Even when that skewer pierced my throat, I still didn’t feel angry. Actually, I felt…glad. I was glad that I
was able to keep my promise and save you. Given all that, how do you think I feel now? Nagito, look at me. How do you think I feel now?"

Hajime noticed the way Nagito glanced at him before complying with Twogami. “There’s no way someone like me could possibly know that.”

“Guess.”

Nagito glanced away and kept his mouth shut, which appeared to be his default response to anything which made him uncomfortable.

Twogami sighed. “At first, I was confused. I wanted to know why you would do such a thing. Even after I learned the truth about our identities, I couldn’t understand it. You didn’t know that truth then. Why would you try to kill yourself in such a way?”


“I already know you weren’t trying to kill me,” Twogami said. Mikan squealed in surprise. Hajime didn’t blame her. He’d already learned this – Nagito had all but admitted it – but it was incredible how quickly Twogami had figured it out. If he’d survived longer…no. He didn’t want to think that way.

“Nagito,” Twogami continued, “I think your definition of hope is fundamentally flawed. But I’m not the one you need to hear that from. The problem runs deeper than that. You yourself have no hope.” No…hope? Nagito, of all people, had no hope? It sounded ridiculous. Utterly absurd. Yet…he’d never thought about it like that. Part of him wanted to agree with Twogami’s words. Could that really be true?

“No hope?” Nagito gave a dry laugh. “You may be right, Twogami-kun.”

“I want you to have hope.”

The silence which followed that statement stretched into eternity. Everyone stared at Nagito. Slowly, like the first crack spreading through a sheet of ice, a brittle sound curled out from his lungs. “Aha…aha…AHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” He laughed until he couldn’t anymore. His sides heaved as his lungs refilled their air. “Have hope? Me? You don’t understand at all. Oh, don’t get upset. It’s my fault. I should have been more enthusiastic.”

“If I don’t understand,” Twogami growled, “then help me to.” Hajime winced. He knew Nagito wouldn’t do that. True to form, Nagito sighed. Hajime masked his growing irritation with a grimace. Should he tell the others about Nagito’s illness? Izuru had mentioned something about curing him, but…no. There was no way he could do that. He felt like that would be a betrayal.

“Well,” Twogami huffed, “I cannot force you to talk. Certainly I understand your desire not to. I was the same way at one time. So here’s the point. I forgive you for your actions in the simulation. If there ever comes a time when you want to talk, I would be glad to listen. Although I may have to get in line to do so.”

His words hit Hajime like physical blows. Forgive him? How could he forgive Nagito so easily? Even if he hadn’t tried to kill him, hadn’t he tried to kill everyone else? But then, why had Nagito laughed about that in the library? Why had he talked about all the evidence he left behind? It seemed so strange. Shaking his head, Hajime went with the easiest question. “In line? What do you mean?”

“Nagito has a number of people he can confide in,” came the answer. “Mikan and Kazuichi, for
example.”

“M-m-me?” Mikan jumped up. “Is that true?” She began sobbing. “Komaeda-kun, I’m so happy!”

Twogami, however, wasn’t done yet. “And of course, Hajime, there’s you.”

“Me? Why me?”

Twogami’s eyes widened. “You mean you don’t—” He cut himself off. “I don’t think Peko was wrong.”

“Pekoyama-san?” Mikan threaded her fingers together. “W-what did she say?”

Twogami opened the door. Light poured into the cottage; Hajime hadn’t even realized that the blinds were still drawn until he had to shield his eyes.

“Mikan, come with me.” The Ultimate Imposter once again channelled Togami. “For now, we are finished here.”

“Y-y-y-yes!” Mikan squeaked as she followed him. Before Hajime could even call out to them, they were gone. Once again, he found himself alone with Nagito. That seemed to be happening to him far too frequently.

“So,” he said. “Um…Sonia brought breakfast if you’re hungry.” He lifted the tray of toast awkwardly. Nagito couldn’t reach it from the bed. Hoping the other wouldn’t notice that mistake, he quickly got up and approached him.

Nagito beamed. “She really is very kind. And it’s toast, too. Better than bagels. I used to like them, but I’m afraid they were ruined for me.”

“Eat.” Hajime tried not to say it like a command, but Nagito wasn’t taking the toast on his own and Hajime felt certain that the other wouldn’t eat at all unless he said something. Sure enough, once he’d said that, Nagito broke off a piece of toast with his fingers and plopped it into his mouth.

Nagito giggled. “So you decided to feed me after all, Hinata-kun.”

“That’s—” The memory of a chained-up Nagito in the old dining hall was not something he needed at this particular moment. He shoved the tray onto the bed. “Just eat.”

A few minutes passed in silence before Hajime spoke again. “How are you feeling?”

“Hmm.” Nagito tilted his head. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The amount of good luck I’ve been blessed with—surely this is worth more than any amount of money, wouldn’t you say?” Unsure of what he was referring to, Hajime nodded slowly. Did he know he’d been cured? Was that it? But then, shouldn’t he be happy? “It’s too much, Hinata-kun.”

“Too much?” What kind of person got upset for experiencing too much good luck?

Nagito sighed again. “You all say you want to understand. I wonder if that’s good luck too.”

Hajime.

Izuru’s voice resonated through his mind.
Tell him it was my talent that cured him. Not his luck.

Izuru?

No response. Did something about his face just encourage people to be cryptic? He bit back a sigh. “Nagito, Izuru wants me to tell you that it was his talent that cured you. Not your luck.” Why did that even matter? From Nagito’s expression, it clearly meant something to him.

“Ah. I thought Kamukura-kun of all people would understand.” Understand? Understand what? His luck? After the fifth trial, Hajime couldn’t discount it anymore. Thinking back on it now, Nagito had told him a lot about his luck. Something about a hijacker on a plane, and a meteorite which killed the hijacker and his parents, and he’d gotten freedom and a large inheritance. Then there was something about being kidnapped by a murderer and finding a lottery ticket. And, of course, his diagnosis and his acceptance to Hope’s Peak.

“Are you….” Hajime hesitated. He must be overthinking this. “Are you afraid of the next bad luck?”

Nagito’s eyes opened. No, not just his eyes. His whole face seemed to open. “Hinata-kun, you do understand. What strong hope you must possess!”

“But…no, I don’t get it. You tossed away your life in the game. You kept trying to get someone to kill you. What are you so afraid of losing? What could you lose that would be so bad that you’d rather die?”

“Hinata-kun.” For a moment, he thought Nagito’s eyes glistened. “You—your hope is weaker than I thought. Say, do you think your hope is stronger than Naegi-kun’s?”

He wanted to snarl. “Answer me.”

“You’re making such a scary face.” Nagito’s own expression turned scornful. “What makes you think I’ll tell you?”

“We’re not in the game anymore! There’s no point in all this secretive crap!”

“You know nothing, Hinata-kun. You really don’t.” Nagito took a deep breath. “I suppose it’s my fault. It was silly of me to expect otherwise from a worthless Reserve Course student.”

Suddenly the room seemed cold as well as dark. Hajime felt weightless. It was like he was floating away into the vastness of space. A seed of anger blossomed in his stomach and restored his senses. It was the easiest thing in the world to glare. It would be easy to hit the other boy, to hit him again and again until this feeling dissipated. Instead, Hajime walked out of the cottage without a backward glance. His own blood pounded in his ears. He still wanted to hit something. To break something.

Wait.

The word crashed through his mind, stunning his other thoughts. Wait? Why?

Listen.

Unsure of why he was doing it, Hajime pressed his ear to his cottage door. From inside, he heard a faint, strangled sound, as if someone were using a pillow to muffle their sobs.

Number of Students: 15
Hello, everybody!

The number of hits this has is insane! I've only had the story out for a little over a month! I'm so glad that there are so many of you enjoying it. Thank you. Thank you so much. <3

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Sorry it's a bit angsty. But not too much. Anyway. This might be my last update before Christmas. I'd like to try to squeeze in one more before then though, so we'll see. After this week, I'll hopefully have more free time to work on this.

As always, feel free to let me know what you thought in the comments. What did you like? What could I do better? What would you like to see in the future?
He’d done it. He’d done it again. He’d promised himself that he wouldn’t mock Hinata-kun anymore, and he’d broken that promise. But he had to. He had to. He’d needed to do that to protect Hinata-kun. It was fine if that made the other hate him. If hating him kept Hinata-kun alive, then he would accept that hatred. Just so long as Hinata-kun lived.

He pressed the pillow tighter against his face. He should suffocate himself right here. No, not here. Hinata-kun wouldn’t be happy to find a body in his bed. He might even be accused of murder. That wouldn’t do. The others would fall into despair if they thought Hinata-kun betrayed them. The Future Foundation would find out, and they would try to kill them. That would give birth to an even greater despair. How strong their hope would become by overcoming it! If he sacrificed Hinata-kun….

Could he sacrifice Hinata-kun? Even for hope? Could he do that again? His whole life, he’d longed to see a brilliant hope, a pure hope, untainted by the darkness of despair. He knew hope could only be created by overcoming despair, but even so, he longed for an even more powerful hope. That was why Ultimates were so special. They were the symbols of hope. They had the potential to embody it - an absolute hope. And someone like Naegi-kun…his hope had to be pure.

“Komaeda-kun?”

He looked up. He was in a small holding cell in the Future Foundation’s headquarters. The overhead bulb sputtered out a dim light. The floors and walls were comprised of dull, off-blue tiles. They reminded Nagito of a public bathroom. Dirty. Cramped. Or maybe the room only seemed dull and drab in comparison to the person standing before him.

“Naegi-sama.”

Behind the Ultimate Hope stood Kirigiri-san. The cold detachment in her eyes reminded him of someone, but he couldn’t quite recall who. The memory darted away from him, fishlike in its evasion. Oh well. He could think about that later.

“Naegi-sama, did you come to visit me? Oh, I’m so happy! I know it must be unbearable, having to come see someone like me in a place like this. Not that I deserve any better!”

“Sama?” The Ultimate Hope shook his head. “Look—”

“Makoto.” Kirigiri-san’s voice sounded like a slap on the face.

“Right. Sorry.” Sheepishly, he touched the corner of his mouth. “Listen, Komaeda-kun. This is important. Have you ever been to a place called Towa City?”

“Towa City?” Nagito pursed his lips as he pretended to think. “That does sound familiar.”

“Familiar, you say?” Kirigiri-san stepped forward. “Is that all?”

“Ah, Kirigiri-san, I expected no less from you!”

“Komaru and Toko both talked about a white-haired boy who called himself Servant,” the Ultimate
Hope said, “They said, well, they said a lot of things about him. Was that you?”

“You even have that glove on your hand,” Kirigiri-san added.

“How detail-oriented! As expected from the Ultimate Detective!” He raised the gloved hand. In the faint lighting, it almost looked like a painted rock. A sudden impulse seized him, and he fell to his knees before the Ultimate Hope. “Would you like to see?” He held the gloved hand over his head like an offering.

The Ultimate Hope flinched but didn’t step away. He couldn’t feel it exactly, but he sensed it when the other took his hand and gently peeled away the glove. The fabric snagged on one of the nails, but rather than force it off, the Ultimate Hope extricated it with great tenderness and care, as if he were holding a newborn baby. Even though the hand belonged to her and not him, Nagito once again felt the other boy’s warmth chase away the chills lingering in his body.

The Ultimate Hope gasped. “Th-this is—!”

“As I suspected,” Kirigiri-san murmured.

Nagito kept his eyes on the ground. The cold stone leeched away the heat given to him. Gifted to him. “How will you overcome my despair, Naegi-sama?” Nagito wrapped his free hand around the Ultimate Hope’s leg. He bowed his head even further until his forehead rested on the other’s shoes. “Won’t you show me?”

The shoes trembled but still didn’t step back. The pressure holding up the other hand vanished, and Nagito’s arm drifted limply to his side. A hand threaded through his hair but, rather than yank it, as he deserved, it gently pulled back until he was forced to look up. The Ultimate Hope knelt so that their faces were on the same level. Nagito barely refrained from hissing.

“What did she do to you?” The Ultimate Hope asked softly. He curled his other hand into a fist. “No, it doesn’t matter. I’m going to save you. I’m going to save all of you!”

“Ah!” Nagito couldn’t contain the cry. “Yes! That’s it! That’s what I was waiting for.”

“Waiting for?” The Ultimate Hope shifted in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Komaeda-kun.” Reluctantly, he shifted his gaze to Kirigiri-san. “You, and your classmates, are the Remnants of Despair.” It was not a question, but Nagito nodded anyway. “What were you doing in Towa City?”


“I want to hear it from you,” Kirigiri-san said evenly.

“I was doing the same thing I am now,” he said. “I’m searching for an absolute hope that can break through any despair. Imagine the hope Naegi-san would have created if she had destroyed the despair in the city. You understand, right?” He peered at the Ultimate Hope. “The way to create hope is to gather the seeds of despair. Then nourish them. Let them grow. And once that despair has reached its full potential, you burn it, all the way down to the roots. There mustn’t be a single seed remaining. Once you’ve done that, only hope will remain.” He desperately wanted to touch the Ultimate Hope again. He needed to feel his body, his warmth, and know that he was right. “Right? You understand, right?”

Kirigiri-san said nothing. That was perfectly understandable. She wasn’t the one Nagito needed an answer from. Although she was the Ultimate Detective, so maybe she could understand where so
many others had failed. It didn’t matter either way. The outcome itself would not change.

“Yes,” the Ultimate Hope said. At last. At last. Nagito’s heart took off like a rocket. “I understand.” The rocket entered orbit, and a sensation of weightlessness settled over Nagito. It seemed like a noteworthy accomplishment that he remained on the floor. “I understand, but…look at me, Komaeda-kun.” He stood up.

Nagito had been afraid to look higher than the other’s waist, even when their faces were level. At that command, he permitted himself to do so. Their eyes met. His, so full of hope, and his face, shining, and his voice too. “Komaeda-kun, there’s more to hope than what you’ve said. Hope is a kind of optimism. It’s about believing the best in other people and in yourself. Don’t you see, Komaeda-kun? Hope doesn’t need despair.” On those words, he pulled Nagito to his feet as well.

“Naegi-sama.” His words were light. The stars, the sun. They radiated an eternal warmth that he wanted to submerge himself in. “You really are beautiful.”

Pink colored the younger boy’s cheeks. “Um…you think so?”

“You’re still on the side of hope?” Kirigiri-san shook her head. “All of your classmates fell into despair. And the person responsible for that is Junko Enoshima. The woman whose hand you now have.”

“Ah, this? You’re correct, Kirigiri-san. Isn’t it amazing? I have made Ultimate Despair my own. I have taken despair into myself. Even trash like me can do that. Don’t you see? Don’t you see? I have allowed the seeds of despair to flourish within me. I can become a container for despair to limit its infection. The more despair I take in, the less others have to suffer. And why not? Hope cannot lose. Absolute hope can never lose to despair. That is why I can allow myself to become despair. If absolute hope can be born from that, then my life is nothing special. I will gladly sacrifice myself for hope. To do so would be the height of luck!”

“No, that’s wrong!” The Ultimate Hope’s voice actually cracked with his cry. Puzzled, Nagito fell silent. Wrong? What was wrong? “Hope doesn’t need despair, and it doesn’t need sacrifice either.” Nagito held his chin. Hope without sacrifice? But wasn’t it natural for strong hope to consume weak hope? Hope without sacrifice was a lie, a delusion held by those too afraid to face the truth. But surely the Ultimate Hope couldn’t have delusions about hope.

“You must have seen the broadcast of our killing school life,” he continued. “I didn’t kill Junko Enoshima. I wanted to save her. After everything she had done, I still wanted to save her. Do you remember what she said in her final moments? ‘The act of living brings me no hope at all.’ That’s how you feel too, isn’t it? Those words…they still haunt me to this day. I can’t stand the thought of anyone feeling that way. It’s just too sad. That’s why I want to save you guys.”

“Naegi-sama wants to save someone like me.” Nagito wondered if he could contain that much excitement. “To elicit such compassion from the Ultimate Hope—yup, I’m really lucky!” What he really wanted to say, “I want you to save me,” lay buried beneath what he had actually said.

“Makoto,” Kirigiri-san began, but he held up a hand.

“Komaeda-kun, do you know what my real talent is? I’m the Ultimate Lucky Student. The SHSL Luckster. Just like you.” Just…like him? Someone with a talent as worthless as luck had become the Ultimate Hope? It was impossible. Something like that couldn’t happen. It couldn’t be allowed to happen. Luck could only ever be a stepping stone for hope. But luck was absolute power.

“Play with me,” Nagito said.
Naegi-kun’s expression changed. “I’m…sorry?”

“Rock-paper-scissors.” Nagito stuffed Junko’s hand into his coat pocket. “Show me your luck. Show me your hope.”

“Um.” Naegi-kun glanced at Kirigiri-san. She said nothing. “I don’t think it works like that.”

“Naegi-kun.” Both of his visitors stepped back at that.


Nagito glanced at their hands. They’d both thrown paper. “Again,” he growled.

“K-Komaeda-kun?”

“Again.” They threw again. Both rock. Both paper. Both scissors. With every draw, Nagito’s confusion deepened. This wasn’t right. How could his luck block the other’s hope? Or…if they were both luck, then what did that mean for the other’s hope?

After ten consecutive stalemates, Nagito lowered his hand. “What are you?”

“Me?” The other looked surprised. “What do you mean?”

“Makoto,” Kirigiri-san said again, sterner this time.

“Right.” He shook his head. “Sorry. Listen, Komaeda-kun. There’s a lot I want to talk to you about. Especially concerning my sister in Towa City. I understand that you’ve been tainted by despair, and that’s why you’re doing these things.” Kirigiri-san glanced away, but Naegi-kun didn’t notice. “I understand that it’s not really your fault. I believe that. No, I know that. This is all Junko Enoshima’s doing. I’m certain that she planned all of this. She must have! But that doesn’t matter. I’m going to save you all anyway.”

“Oh?” Nagito knew it was time to progress the plot. Time to set the stage of hope’s triumph. “But aren’t we about to be killed? The Future Foundation won’t want to leave the Remnants of Despair alive.”

Determination bloomed in Naegi-kun’s eyes. “I will save you.” His words were starlight. Yes, there could be no mistake. This being standing before him was most definitely the Ultimate Hope. Nothing else mattered. This was the existence he’d spent his entire life seeking. Now all he had to do was give his own life meaning. And the only way he could do that was by becoming a stepping stone for the Ultimate Hope.

“Why did you tip us off about your true identities?” Kirigiri-san asked. “What are you planning?” Nagito leaned against the wall and sighed.

“Komaeda-kun,” said the Ultimate Hope, “I need you to answer her.”

“For hope, of course,” Nagito said instantly. “As you so astutely observed, Kirigiri-san, I will always be on the side of hope. Junko Enoshima is the one I truly hate. And because I hate her so much, I – huh?” His words stalled. He’d been using the truth to progress their plan, but now…what was this? “I hate her? That doesn’t seem right.” The words sounded funny. Tasted funny. Hate? Junko? “Junko? Do I hate her? Junko? Junko, Junko, Junko, Junko? Ahaha. AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” He rounded on his visitors, both of whom now huddled near the doorway. “Please, Naegi-sama! Save this world from despair!”
“Nagito?”

He looked up. He was back in Hinata-kun’s cottage. Soft light tiptoed through the windows and spilled over Hinata-kun. Why was he back? Hadn’t Nagito just driven him away? It didn’t feel like much time had passed. So why had Hinata-kun returned?

“Hinata-kun? Did you forget something?”

That must have been the wrong question because Hinata-kun scowled. Nagito revised his hypothesis. “Ah, then are you here to kick me out? I don’t blame you. It is your cottage, after all. I can understand why you wouldn’t want someone like me in—”

“Nagito, just…stop.”

“Stop what?”

“A minute ago, you were calling me worthless, and now you’re back to…fawning over me. I don’t get it. What do you really think?” He sighed. “I thought I heard crying, so I came back.”

Nagito hesitated. Crying? The pillow had been too thin to muffle the sound then. “Maybe you heard wrong?”

“Yeah.” He brushed a hand through his hair. His ahoge jumped right back up. “Maybe.” He looked so resigned. Nagito wanted to feel disappointed, but the other looked unnervingly cute like this. He settled for sitting up, letting his legs dangle over the side of the bed. Their pale pallor disgusted him. He might have thrown up if he’d been in his own room.

“Nagito,” Hinata-kun said after a minute. “Fuyuhiko told me that I was your…favorite. I didn’t think much about it at the time, but your behavior back in the lobby and the way Twogami said I was first in line to talk to you made me remember that. So is it true? Am I your favorite?”

“Yes,” Nagito said simply.

“Oh.” Hinata-kun blinked a few times. He evidently hadn’t expected such an immediate response. Nagito supposed that surprise made sense. “Why?”

Why? That was a dangerous question. Being completely honest was off the table. To be completely honest would endanger the other. He’d said that he had nearly died in the shower. That was Nagito’s fault. Bad luck. He needed to experience bad luck. He needed to push Hinata-kun away before it was too late. But every time they spoke, he found that more and more difficult to do. If this kept up, it would be impossible. He would start to think, hey, maybe this time would be different. He’d thought that before. It never was. But maybe Hinata-kun’s hope would be strong enough to withstand his luck. Nagito wanted to believe that. He desperately wanted to believe that.

A hope that didn’t require sacrifice or despair, huh?

“Hinata-kun.” He struggled to keep his need out of his tone. “I know you have no reason to believe me. I understand that. But if I promised to tell you one day, would you believe me?”

Hinata-kun’s face was unreadable, though part of that might have been because Nagito kept falling into the trap of staring into his mismatched eyes. They were a constant reminder of Hinata-kun’s hope and talent. Or maybe something more. No, that was silly. There couldn’t be something more.

“Yes,” Hinata-kun said. “I would believe you.”
Nagito could breathe again. Why the other would believe him escaped him, but if he said he did, Nagito would believe it. "Thank you."

“What about you?”

“Huh?” He stiffened again. For once, he didn’t know what the other was trying to say. “Me? What do you mean?”

Hinata-kun took a deep breath. “Why do you think I want to believe you? To know more about you?” Why indeed. It was exactly like Hinata-kun to throw out the hardest questions so casually. Why? His behavior had definitely changed since the game. He seemed more confident in himself and more open to his fellow students. The way he reached out to Nagito now was almost aggressive. Like he was afraid that, if he didn’t, he would lose him. But that couldn’t be right.

Hinata-kun was still waiting for an answer. There was no escape from his gaze; both that golden-green eye and that crimson-red one bound him more firmly than ropes or chains. Nagito hung his head. He could say nothing.

“You don’t know, do you?” The other sounded more surprised than satisfied. “You really don’t know?” He shook his head. “You’re the smartest person on this island, but when it comes to feelings, to how people feel, it’s just…no. I don’t know. It’s not like I’m an expert there.”

“The smartest person on this island?” Nagito laughed. “Are you praising me? Come now, Hinata-kun. That’s not true. Surely you would suit that title better than me.”


“That’s wrong, Hinata-kun!” The other shouldn’t talk about himself like that. “You were the one who defeated Enoshima-san. Not Kamukura-kun.”

“Yeah.” Hinata-kun looked unconvinced. “Maybe.”

“It may not mean much,” Nagito said, “but I believe in you.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Who believes in me, you mean? No one, I imagine.” That seemed obvious.

“What about Twogami? Mikan? Me?”

By now, Nagito knew he had experienced more than enough good luck to counterbalance the bad luck of missing Enoshima-san’s death – again – and losing his hand. Yet Hinata-kun seemed almost blissfully unaware. He’d even asked about it a few minutes ago, but here he was again, pretending that his luck didn’t exist. Was he just afraid to confront that truth? Throughout the simulation, many of the other Ultimates had been tempted to take the easy path. But Hinata-kun had always pushed forward.

“Nagito.” The other waited until he looked up before continuing. “I was thinking about what you said in the library.”

“What did I say in the library, Hinata-kun?”

“It feels really weird for me to keep using your first name while you use my last,” he complained. “If you won’t call me Hajime, then at least drop the honorific. I think we’ve reached that point.”
“Sure, Hinata.” Nagito bit his tongue to keep the honorific from escaping.

“Anyway,” Hinata-kun – Hinata – said. “You mentioned leaving behind all those bits of evidence. As I thought about it, I realized you were right. You could have easily hidden that evidence if you’d wanted to. And if you’d done that, we all would have died. But you deliberately left us evidence pointing to the truth…and you left me a clue to the traitor’s identity. Me, specifically. If you really wanted us all to die, you wouldn’t have done that. It doesn’t make sense.”

Despite everything, Nagito felt his heart speed up. It sped up even more when Hinata sat on the bed next to him. “But if you’d wanted us all to survive, you didn’t have to go to such lengths. You could have worked with us. We could have escaped together. So that doesn’t make sense either. So what I don’t understand is this. Why did you do that? Why would you kill yourself like that?”

Nagito caught himself wondering whether or not Hinata’s shoulder would make a comfortable pillow. He shoved that thought aside. “You don’t act like someone who’s scared, Hinata-kun. Hinata.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” He always asked his questions so innocently. Well, maybe not always. He could be quite assertive during the trials. But Hinata was too kind to compel any answers now. He never got violent. In a way, that was worse.

“Aren’t you afraid of me?” He was pretty sure he’d heard Hinata express that sentiment. “I won’t do anything, of course, but it still seems strange. Though if you wanted to do something to me, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Can you stop?” The other still had no interest in hiding in annoyance. That or he was really poor at it. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“Ahhhh.” The weight of his metal hand meant he had to exert slightly more force than usual to lift it. “You must really hate me if that’s what you think.” When Hinata said nothing, Nagito’s heartbeat accelerated beyond what should have been possible. He bit the inside of his cheek. “Do you hate me?”

“No!” The strength of the objection shook the bed. “No, it’s just…I don’t understand you.”

A storm of emotion cascaded over Nagito. “But you’re close.” He jammed his hands into his lap. “I mean, you try. You tried when no one else did. That’s why….” He managed to contain himself before he ruined everything. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?” He couldn’t say this question was unexpected.

“For burdening you.” For making fun of you. “For making you worry about me.” For loving you. Hinata grunted but otherwise stayed silent. Nagito expanded his answer. “I’m sorry for calling you a worthless Reserve Course student. I didn’t realize that it hurt you so badly.”

Hinata snorted. “You didn’t realize?”

Nagito shook his head. He didn’t know how to prove it. He didn’t even know if it was entirely true. It wasn’t a lie, but…he just didn’t know.

“Are you ready to answer me now? Why would you do that to yourself?”

“Tell me what you think,” Nagito said, “and then I’ll tell you what I think.”

Hinata pursed his lips. “Fine.” Nagito barely succeeded in masking his smile at the world.
“You wanted to hide the signs of poisoning,” Hinata said. That was decided. But that hadn’t been everything. If it had just been to hide the signs of poisoning, then he would have hidden the poison too. But it would be easier if Hinata thought that was all there was. Then Nagito could push him away without fear.

“But,” Hinata continued. Nagito stared at him. “I don’t think that was all. I think you wanted – needed – to punish yourself for becoming Ultimate Despair. I mean…you said it yourself, didn’t you? That you could never forgive killing for the sake of despair.”

Nagito wrapped the blanket more tightly around his legs. He was acutely aware of Hinata’s presence beside him. The way his body moved with every breath. The way his ahoge swayed when he moved his head. The way his heterochromatic eyes pinned him in place – not sharply or forcefully but gently, like a friendly hand on his shoulder. For a brief second, he remembered Yukizome-sensei before she fell into despair.

“Hinata, I—”

“…What is it, Nagito?”

Nagito shook his head. His heart threatened to burst out of his chest. Kamukura-kun said he had cured his dementia, so why didn’t he feel any different? Why was it still so hard to talk to Hinata? No, he knew why. It was the same reason behind everything else. Luck. If a tsunami swept over the island, shattered everyone’s cottages, flooded the hotel, destroyed their means of surviving on the island, and drowned everyone, then maybe, just maybe, that would be enough bad luck for him to be able to tell Hinata. Until then, he…he….

“Hinata, I’m sorry.” Tears blurred his vision, but he held them back, shutting his eyes so Hinata wouldn’t see. He wanted Hinata to wrap his arms around him and tell him everything was okay, that he was forgiven, that someone like him could be forgiven. But Hinata did not move.

“I’m glad,” he muttered.

Nagito kept his eyes closed. He’d always told himself it was pointless to think about the dead. If he did that, he’d get stuck. He’d never be able to move forward with his life. He’d lost too many people. Far too many. Family. Friends like Nanami-san or Yukizome-sensei. If he allowed himself to dwell in their memories, their ghosts would drown him. No, not their ghosts. His guilt and regrets. Everyone he had ever loved, dead, and all because he wasn’t strong enough to control his own luck.

But…but even so…even so, at that moment, he desperately wanted Nanami-san or Yukizome-sensei to be there.

Without his dementia, Nagito found himself gazing into the abyss of his mind. Its vastness terrified him. Everywhere he turned, he discovered nothing but darkness. Darkness upon darkness, drawing him in, swallowing him whole.

“Hinata-kun.” The other’s name was his sole source of warmth. “What should I do?”

If the question surprised him, it surprised Hinata-kun (HINATA) even more. “If I knew that…hah. I don’t have all the answers. For now, I just want you to be honest with me.”

“Why?” The word slithered over his skin. “I don’t understand. Why are you so patient with me?”

“Patient?” Hinata gave a short laugh. “I don’t know. I just stormed out of here a few minutes ago.”
“The Ultimate Tsundere?”

He actually laughed. Genuinely, or at least, it sounded that way. “Jeez! I don’t want that!” He sighed.

“Either way,” Nagito continued, “you are patient. You still talk to me like this. You don’t hate me. I really think…that’s a wonderful thing.” Even if it didn’t make any sense. This kind of intimacy…wasn’t it wasted on him? It had to be simple kindness. He hoped it was, but he also hoped it was something more. He hated himself for wanting that. It was a miserable, selfish desire.

“Nagito.”

“Hinata.” They’d spoken at the same time. Nagito suddenly felt very warm beneath the blankets. “Go ahead.”

“After you.”

“Oh, no. Whatever you have to say is surely more important.”

Hinata shrugged. “I was just going to say I’m doing this because I want to. That’s all.”

“Because you want to?” The words puckered his mouth. “That’s…I see.” He refrained from saying ‘boring.’ “What if I didn’t want you to?”

Hinata’s mouth dropped open. “Well, uh, then I’d leave. I guess. Is that what you want?”

Caught between the black holes of yes and no, Nagito could not answer. “Why do you want to spend time with me?”

“You’re right,” Hinata said abruptly. “I am scared. But it’s more than that. I don’t really even know how to describe it. I just want to.”

But why? The question drove against Nagito’s body like ocean waves. Why? Why? He didn’t understand this side of Hinata at all. Being hated was so much easier. He understood that. But this time…this time, it was different, and he didn’t understand why.

“I don’t want you to be scared.” Like he had been when he’d sobbed into Lucky’s fur, clutching his limp body in his arms as if hugging him tightly enough could bring him back to life. “I only wanted to give you hope. Hinata!” His words gushed out of him like a waterfall. “What did I do wrong? I don’t – I don’t want to leave things like this! I want to help fix everything. Even if that’s impossible. I want to help fix everything with—” Falling with his words, Nagito managed to twist aside at the last moment. “—with everyone.”

Hinata stood up. His shirt slid and settled back into place as he turned to face Nagito. He held out his hand. “Then let’s fix everything. Together.”

Nagito took his hand, and Hinata pulled him to his feet. Nothing else needed saying between them. Well, a lot did, but there wasn’t anything else he trusted himself enough to say at that moment.

Maybe one day.

But for now, holding onto that hope was enough.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Hinata hesitated for a few seconds before opening it. Pekoyama-kun stood there. Her face was so still that it might have been carved from stone.
“Hinata-kun, Komaeda-kun, come quickly!”

“What is it?” Hinata asked. “What’s going on?”

“There are ships approaching the island,” she answered. “Lots of them.”


As Nagito followed, the Ultimate Swordswoman placed a hand on his arm. “Did you tell him?”

Nagito shrugged. “Did you tell Kuzuryu-kun?”

“Humph.” She could have been annoyed or amused. “I suppose these things take time.” Nagito followed her out of the cottage. “Do you want to make a bet?”

“A bet?” He shook his prosthetic hand. “With me? Are you sure?”

The ghost of a smile floated over her lips. “Let’s bet on which of us confesses first.”


She paused. “You know what I mean. Which of us will take the next step first?”

The wind felt warm on his skin. “Why would you want to do that?”

“I told you, didn’t I?” She kept walking. “Because I know how it feels to hide the truth.” He couldn’t see her face, but something in her tone resonated with him.

“Thank you, Peko,” he said softly. Peko gave no sign that she’d heard him, but he felt certain that she had.

As they approached the beach, he was struck by how dark everything seemed. The sky was an old, angry bloodstain etched across the heavens. It had long since dried over, and Nagito might have assigned it some deeper meaning if he hadn’t long since discarded faith in a higher power. Out at sea, the white hulls of the approaching fleet sliced through the water. The other Ultimates had already gathered on the shore. Hinata stood above them, watching the ships.

“They found us,” Souda-kun was saying.

“Obviously,” Kuzuryu-kun growled.

“S-s-so what should we do?” Tsumiki-kun was about to burst into tears.

“I’ve brought Komaeda.” Peko announced. “We’re all here now.”

“Komaeda-kun!” Nidai-kun ran over to him. Nevermind-kun, Souda-kun, and Tsumiki-kun were right behind him. “How are you feeling?” This level of concern was not unexpected from the Ultimate Team Manager. What was unexpected was that Nidai-kun’s concern was directed at him.

“You’re too kind to worry so much for me, Nidai-kun.”

“You fool!” He roared. “As the Ultimate Team Manager, I need to look out for everyone here. That includes you too. Gah! So much happened in the game that could have been avoided if I’d been a better manager.”

“Nekomaru!” Akane moved to stand beside him. “It’s not your fault.”
“Listen to me,” Nidai-kun continued. “That’s why it’s not enough for me to be the Ultimate Team Manager. I must be the Super-Duper Ultimate Team Manager! We will stand against despair together!” He grabbed Nagito’s hand and shook it.

“Hey,” Souda-kun whispered, “so how’s the robot arm?” Nagito hadn’t even realized the other was running his hands over it until he looked. “Can you lift it? Move it okay? Maybe you can even jiggle it around like—”

Fearing that Hanamura-kun might have suddenly possessed Souda-kun, Nagito went to move his new hand.

“Fuhahaha!” Tanaka-kun’s laugh cut him off. “Such measly mortals are of no concern.” He must be talking about the ships.

“That’s right,” Koizumi-kun said. “If they’re coming here, then they must have already arrested Naegi-san.”

“Eh? Already?” Saionji-kun frowned. “But there should still be time left.”

Hanamura-kun flinched. “Maybe the Future Foundation got tired of waiting?”

“He came to save us,” Nevermind-kun insisted. “We must go to him.”

“But won’t we just make things worse?” Souda-kun asked. “I mean, we’re the Remnants of Despair. What can any of us do for Naegi-san?”

“Yeah,” Owari-kun muttered. “And he did good, right? So they’ll um…let him off, right?”

“Of course not,” Nagito said. There was a brief pause as the others turned to look at him. “They gave him four days, and they violated that promise. They don’t have any intention of playing fair. They want to get rid of him because that’s their hope.” He studied the approaching ships. “Getting rid of us is their hope too. They’ve already involved us in this. But…I…” Saying this was even harder than he’d expected. But everyone’s eyes were on him. Even Hinata offered a reassuring nod. Seeing that, Nagito licked his lips and said what was in his heart. “I want to see a hope that doesn’t come from sacrifice.” It sounded ridiculous. Impossible. A hope that didn’t grow by consuming weaker hope or despair? A hope that could exist independently? He’d thought Naegi-kun might be that hope. But maybe he’d been wrong. It was like Hinata had said. Maybe, if they couldn’t find what they were looking for, then they could create it themselves.

Hinata smiled at him. “It sounds like you have a plan.”

Nagito smiled back. “I sure do.”

Number of Students: 15

Chapter End Notes

This may be a bit late, but Merry Christmas/Happy Holidays everyone! Yeah, there's nothing Christmas-y in this chapter, but...eh.

This concludes the first "arc" of this story. I honestly wasn't sure whether I should split this into two parts in a series or keep it all as one work (because the next "arc" deals
much more with external threats, though of course, the relationships between all the characters will continue developing). For now, I think I'm going to keep it as one.

The next chapter will pick up immediately after the Hope Episode, much like how this episode ended immediately before it. I'll mention this again there, but that's the reason for the "timeskip" between this chapter and the next one.

As always, thank you so much for reading! Seeing all of you enjoying this work has been the greatest Christmas present I could ask for. Thank you, everyone!
Clouds on the Horizon May Hold Rain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After consuming Teruteru’s latest dish, Hajime wondered how he would ever eat again. His eyes had been bigger than his stomach, as the saying went. He had a vague recollection of the Ultimate Cook, or Chef as he still preferred to be called, bragging about how nobody could stop eating his dishes. Hajime had suspected that might be due to foreign influences in the food, and while he still couldn’t completely rule that out, he had to admit that at least part of its addictive quality came from the Ultimate Cook’s skill.

But he couldn’t just stand around on the deck and listen to the boat cut through the ocean. They’d just re-cemented themselves as the Remnants of Despair, taking credit for the fall of the Future Foundation in a broadcast issued worldwide. That opened a whole new sea of problems. Beginning with the fact that, if redemption hadn’t been impossible before, it certainly was now. The entire world believed that they’d just destroyed, or nearly destroyed, its hope. Once again, they were nothing more than the greatest criminals in world history.

But they’d all known the consequences of falsely taking credit for the Future Foundation’s destruction. They needed to preserve its image as a symbol of hope. If the world learned the truth—that its founder, Tengan, had fallen into despair in an effort to force Ryota Mitarai to brainwash the entire world into mindlessly obeying hope—there would be no coming back. Naegi would take care of it. He was the best possible person to restore hope to everyone. And since he and those close to him knew the truth, Hajime and the others wouldn’t have to fear any retaliation. So long as they stayed quiet, hiding on Jabberwock Island or elsewhere, they’d be fine.

The only question was, was that enough? He had known going in that redemption might already be impossible. Even if it was entirely Junko Enoshima’s fault—even if she had brainwashed his classmates into becoming Ultimate Despair—that didn’t change the way any of them felt about it. True, they had just done a great good for the world by saving Makoto Naegi and preventing Ryota Mitarai from turning people into mindless puppets. And it wasn’t like Hajime had expected or even wanted recognition. But even so. Even so, it would have been nice. Now the rest of the world would hate them, and only a select few would ever know the truth. They would have to carry the burden of despair for the rest of their lives. Nor would it die with them. Their names would be recorded right next to Enoshima’s. They were alive, but being alive meant they had to deal with the consequences of their actions.

If his parents were still alive, what would they have thought?

Looking at his friends scattered about the deck rejuvenated Hajime. He saw Akane and Nekomaru heading downstairs, presumably to train. Peko accompanied them, which seemed a bit odd. Was everything okay between her and Fuyuhiko? The Ultimate Imposter, now wearing the form of Mitarai, spoke with the real Mitarai. Hajime didn’t quite understand the bond between the two, but he saw its depth, and he decided to give them a few minutes alone. He could talk to Mitarai more later. Sonia had spotted a dolphin, and now she and Gundham were leaning over the railing. They were glued there, waiting for the creature to reappear. Surprisingly, Kazuichi wasn’t with them. He’d gone below deck to check on the engine room. As for the others, Hajime wasn’t sure. He knew they’d wandered off somewhere, but that was a remarkably unhelpful piece of knowledge. Mahiru and Hiyoko were probably together, but as for everyone else…Hajime decided to try and find them. He told himself that he wasn’t worried about them. They’d all made the decision to take
the fall together. Not a single person had objected. He was worried for them. Everyone seemed okay, but after everything they had endured, everyone was good at seeming okay.

The sound of voices from one of the cabins paused his search.

“Now listen up!” That ringing enthusiasm could only belong to one person. “Ibuki-chan brought you here because things have been super tense between you two. You need to hug and make up. Kyaaah! If this were a song, I’d call it ‘Two Guys Platonically Bond on a Boat.’”

“Platonically?” Came a pitched question that clearly belonged to Teruteru. He’d also slipped back into his country accent—a nervous tic, perhaps? “Now look here. I’m all for bonding. Really. I’m the biggest supporter of bonding. Heh. But I, ah, I don’t think this is such a good idea.”

“That’s perfectly understandable. Most people wouldn’t want to bond with trash like me.” Hajime winced. He’d hoped the self-deprecation would have stopped by now. On the bright side, Nagito had been doing it less and less. Maybe ‘most people’ was a step up from ‘no one.’ Hajime supposed these things would take a lot of time to overcome. And others never would be. They would have to carry those things with them for the rest of their lives.

“Nagito-chan! You’re not trash at all! Ibuki thinks you’re both smart and pretty.”

“Smart? Pretty? Are you complimenting me?”

“Yes!”


“Cause,” Ibuki giggled, “Ibuki-chan wanted to see Mikan-chan’s cute face!”

Smiling to himself, Hajime kept walking. He could trust Ibuki to handle this. As for mending the other relationships…it was true that Nagito and Teruteru had been avoided each other. But Mahiru and Fuyuhiko and Peko and, to a lesser extent, Hiyoko and Fuyuhiko, were doing something similar. Nagito and Fuyuhiko’s relationship was downright hostile. Gundham was still eccentric enough to be a bit of an outsider, but that didn’t seem like too big of a problem. Sonia had helped bring him into the group. Hiyoko had managed to stop insulting everyone every time she spoke. Despite a few hiccups here and there, they were a team. No, more than that. They were a family. Chiaki had once said that they were all splendid. Now he could finally agree.

After all, they didn’t have anyone else. No families, no friends, save for a handful of people in the Future Foundation. If Naegi and the others could even be called friends, that was. Everyone in the world despised them. All they had was each other.

The most important thing to do now was bring Mitarai into their family. And while he had no doubt that Twogami—though now that he had Mitarai’s appearance, they may have to find something else to call him—was more than capable of that, as the leader, Hajime felt like he should do something.

“Yo, Hajime.” The greeting pulled him out of his thoughts. Fuyuhiko stood before him, arm raised somewhere between a wave and a salute. “Got a minute?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Well….” His exhale was too heavy to be called a sigh. “I’ll kill you if you tell anyone I asked you this. Got it?” He didn’t wait for Hajime’s response before continuing. “How do you deal with the nightmares?”
Huh? Hajime decided to overlook the death threat, since he knew Fuyuhiko didn’t mean it. “Nightmares? What do you mean?”

He looked shocked. “You mean you aren’t having any? About…the past?” Oh. Oh. Hajime felt like a giant prick. Now that he mentioned it, the last nightmare Hajime remembered having was the one Izuru had shown him a few days ago. Unless the game everyone had been playing together counted as a nightmare. But the only part of that which had terrified him was at the very end, so maybe…did that count? He wasn’t sure. No, that didn’t count, because most of it had been…nice? Right? So that was more a dream than a nightmare. But with Izuru taking over his body while he slept, he didn’t know whether or not he’d had any nightmares. He certainly didn’t remember any. Was that because of Izuru? It wasn’t…it wasn’t because he didn’t regret what had happened or because he didn’t feel guilty, right? Because he did. He did. He was sure of that much. There was no way he didn’t, right?

Fuyuhiko glared across the bow of his ship. No matter how many times he saw it, Hajime had never gotten used to seeing that eyepatch. He wondered if he ever would. Not to mention Nagito’s metal arm. All of those things were scars left by the past. More burdens for their wearers to carry. The last thing they needed was for Hajime and the others to feel weirded out or disgusted by those scars. And it wasn’t disgust, it was just…well, they probably felt the same way whenever they looked at his eyes. Hajime knew he’d made it a point to never look in a mirror if he could avoid it. But all these physical changes were a reminder of things they would be better off forgetting. No, not better off. They’d all forgotten once before, with the Neo World Program. It was only in remembering that they could make a meaningful future. But that didn’t make it any less painful.

“I thought you of all people would understand,” Fuyuhiko said. “Just forget it then. It’s nothing.”

“Wait!” Hajime called. “There’s just been so much going on, and….” No, that wasn’t going to get him anywhere. There wasn’t enough evidence to defend that line of reasoning. “Look, maybe I can help. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

“What are you, my mom?” Fuyuhiko snorted. “Just forget I said anything. It doesn’t matter anyway. Apparently.”

“Fuyuhiko, I can help you—”

“I don’t need your help!” The other boy bristled. “I’ll handle this, okay? I know what I’m doing.” He turned on his heels and stalked off. Hajime wanted to follow, but something told him it was better to leave Fuyuhiko alone for now. He thought he’d seen the last of this side of Fuyuhiko’s personality back in the simulation. But then, he guessed that would have been unrealistic. People didn’t change that quickly. The important thing was that Fuyuhiko was trying. They all were.

“YAHOOOOOO!” He turned just in time to avoid getting completely knocked over by Ibuki’s embrace. She really hadn’t held back; if they’d been near the edge, they could well have fallen over the railing. “Yahello, Hajime-chan!”

Since pushing her off him was out of the question—her grip had an unearthly power behind it that briefly reminded him of Gundam—Hajime rolled his eyes and hugged her back. It felt weird. He wasn’t a very huggy person. In fact, he didn’t much like touching in general. Fortunately, his reciprocation satisfied Ibuki, and she stepped back. “Hey,” he greeted somewhat late. “I thought you were with—” too late, he realized that he’d just admitted to eavesdropping.

Ibuki laughed. “I left Nagito-chan and Teruteru-chan in a room together so they could make up. Don’t worry though. Ibuki-chan doesn’t ship them. She knows Nagito-chan is all yours.”
Shipping? All his? What the heck was she talking about? Knowing Ibuki, it was probably better not to ask. “That’s…good? I guess?” Possibly?

“Mm-hmm. That’s right.” She nodded in affirmation of her own statement. “Ibuki-chan did good, right? Super-duper good, right? So gimme lots and lots of praise!”

“Right.” Hajime couldn’t help smiling. The Ultimate Musician was a force of nature. Once the tidal waves of her boundless enthusiasm swept over you, there was nothing left to do except ride them out. “I guess you were pretty cool today.”

She giggled. “You too, Hajime-chan. You managed to talk Mitarai-chan down all by yourself.”

He shook his head. “That’s not true. I had all of you there with me.”

“Hmmm.” Ibuki narrowed her eyes mischievously. “Say, maybe he’d like to hear one of my songs? What do you think?”

The image of Mitarai’s anime running with Ibuki’s soundtrack spawned in Hajime’s mind. Such a monster should never be allowed to exist.

“Um,” he said, trying to sound neutral, “maybe…some other time?”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm,” she said again. “I see. Hajime-chan, you always give the best advice! My song would be so much better if I had my electric guitar, and my speakers, and, oh, we need a drum set for you of course, don’t think I forgot, and Hiyoko-chan can dance too. Kyaaaah!” Her shrieks were another thing that Hajime thought he might never get used to. One of these days, she would definitely give him a heart attack. “Hajime-chan! I just had a fantastical idea.” He had to process that word for a second. It sounded like she’d tried to combine ‘fantastic’ and ‘spectacular.’ Combining words was something Ibuki would absolutely do. Combining large words…not so much. Then he realized she wasn’t continuing.

He sighed. “What’s your idea?”

“We should have a huuuuuge party!” That…actually wasn’t such a bad idea. A party might be exactly what everyone needed now. No one would try to kill anyone else this time. Naegi had ensured that their boat had a fresh stock of provisions, so they wouldn’t hurt for food or other supplies for some time. And they had just helped save the world. He was pretty sure that merited a party. He wasn’t Togami, after all. He knew the importance of celebrations or morale boosts.

“Great idea, Ibuki!” He hoped she hadn’t noticed the pause in the conversation. If she did, she didn’t comment on it.

“Ibuki has to go back to Teruteru-chan and ask him about preparing food,” Ibuki sung. “Bye-bye, Hajime-chan!”

“What about having him and Nagito make up?” He asked no one. She had already disappeared, prancing—prancing, really—back to the cabin. He watched as she opened the door and disappeared inside. Before the door had a chance to close, Nagito slipped out of the room. He headed over to the ship’s railing and leaned on it. A gust of wind flapped through his coat.

Hajime averted his gaze. After his earlier conversation with Nagito, he finally felt like he was making real progress toward understanding him. But then, he’d felt that way before, and every time, the other boy had pulled the rug out from under him. This time though, he felt like the other had been able to understand him as well, if only a little. Perhaps that meant things would be different this time. And being different—well, that was interesting.
But it wasn’t Nagito he was most concerned about now. It was Mitarai, followed by Fuyuhiko. Maybe Peko would know something. Once Fuyuhiko made up his mind, it took a lot to get him to change it. First things first.

Hajime headed to the cabins on the other end of the ship. In the second one, he found the Ultimate Imposter and the Ultimate Animator.

“What am I supposed to do?” Mitarai was saying. “I don’t…I don’t know anything about any of them. I’ve only ever met Tsumiki-san, Nanami-san, and Komaeda-kun.”

“Didn’t you hear what Hajime said earlier?” Okay, Hajime revised his earlier thoughts. Nothing seemed stranger to him than hearing the Ultimate Imposter sound like this. “You are one of us. I promise you, everyone here feels the same way.”

Hajime knocked. The voices within the room stopped instantly. After a moment, he heard Twogami say, “come in.” Not in Twogami’s voice, but from the tone, Hajime knew it was him. He opened the door.

“Hi,” he said.

Mitarai looked at a spot on the floor. “Hi.” His voice was soft. Reserved. A far cry from the determination he’d shown a few hours earlier. Still, after the way things had ended, Hajime couldn’t blame him. He imagined he’d sounded somewhat similar after learning the truth about his identity.

“The others would love to see you,” Hajime said. “Why don’t you come see them?” That sounded too patronizing. He wasn’t Mitarai’s mother. It wasn’t his job to help him make new friends. He wondered if he had an Ultimate Orator talent, and if so, how could he activate it?

Mitarai locked his hands together. “Is that even true?”

The Ultimate Imposter glanced between the two of them. Then, groaning to himself, he stood up. Without another word, he stomped out of the room.

“Wait!” Mitarai called, but he was already gone. The door thudded shut behind him. Mitarai folded his arms against his body, as if trying to take up as little space as possible. Hajime checked a sigh. It wasn’t that he minded helping people. He just…didn’t feel good at it. But he must be doing something right, since he’d gotten everyone else to be open with him. In turn, he’d been able to be open with them. It wasn’t a matter of trying to accomplish some grand purpose. Events just unfolded that way, and Hajime found a type of comfort in that knowledge. Not everything had to be complicated. He wondered what Izuru would think about that.

With Mitarai curled up, Hajime had plenty of room to sit on the bed next to him. The other wasn’t crying, but he had gone completely still. It didn’t seem like he would say anything. Hajime was about to ask what being the Ultimate Animator was like before remembering that, given how he’d just stopped Mitarai from using an anime to brainwash the entire world (not a sentence he thought he would ever need to consider), that might not be the best icebreaker.

“A ship full of super-criminals, huh?” He tried. “You know, I imagine my parents had higher hopes for me than that.” He knew they did. It’s not that they were bad parents. They’d never hurt him or even said anything expressing that sentiment. But whenever he’d been around them, he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were disappointed. Like they’d wanted something more. Something less average.
Mitarai curled up even tighter. So that had been the wrong tactic. Or he was just terrible at joking. Fine. He’d have to be serious then.

“No one here blames you, Mitarai.”

The other lifted his head, but his expression was dark. “Easy for you to say. You’re the only person here who I didn’t help push into despair.”

“Then, why don’t we go ask the others? I promise, Mitarai, not one of them will blame you.” He hoped that was true. No, that had to be true. “But that doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Huh?” Confusion blossomed in the other’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You blame yourself, right? I understand that feeling.” Hajime had not made a conscious effort to channel Naegi, but once he said that, he realized that’s what was happening. Mitarai looked up to Naegi, sort of like Nagito, so maybe that wasn’t a bad thing, but still. “All of us blame ourselves too. Some of us are still having nightmares about the things we did as Ultimate Despair. Even if the whole world was as understanding as Naegi, we’d still blame ourselves. That’s why it’s like I told you before. This isn’t about redemption or forgiveness. Not from anyone else. But if we can forgive each other and help us to forgive ourselves, then maybe…”

He wasn’t even sure what he was trying to say at this point. Forgive each other, he’d just said. Nagito’s name hung like a dark shadow over those words. After all the conversations they’d had, and the real progress they’d made toward mutual understanding, Hajime wanted to forgive Nagito. He really did. Back in the simulation, he already would have, now that he knew Nagito had been telling the truth the whole time. But something inside him wouldn’t let him do that. Something closed off his heart to the idea. Maybe it was Izuru, but he doubted it. This felt different.

“Those are words.” Mitarai bit his lip. “That’s all.”

“Maybe.” Hajime shrugged. “But they worked before, didn’t they?” If an anime could change the world (really? Twice in one day?), then words certainly could. At the very least, Chiaki’s words had changed his world, and he was fairly sure he had—somehow—done the same for Mitarai.

When Mitarai didn’t say anything, Hajime pressed onward. “Look. I’m not going to tell you what or how to feel. That’s not something you can predict. I mean, control.” There were so many problems that could have been avoided if people could determine their own feelings. “I just wanted to tell you, you know, have a home with us.” The image of Hiyoko cackling at that cliché filled his mind. “There’s no rush,” he continued, dismissing that image. “Whenever you’re ready.”

He stood up and made his way to the door. As he placed his hand on the knob to open it, Mitarai’s voice called him back. “Can I…talk to Tsumiki-san?”

“Yeah. Of course. I’ll ask her to come see you.”

“Thank you, Hinata-kun.” Kun. Great. Just when he’d gotten Nagito to stop using it. Still, he didn’t want to do or say anything which might make Mitarai more uncomfortable, so he nodded and left the room. Time, he reminded himself. These things would take time. It had taken weeks for everyone to unify in the simulation. Actually, truth be told, there had never really been a point where everyone unified. There had never been a point where everyone promised to stop killing and to fight the mastermind, like Naegi and his friends had done in their killing game.

He supposed it was ironic that it took unspeakable despair to unite the Remnants of Despair against despair. Wow. That was a lot of despair.
If he remembered correctly, Mikan was in the room with Teruteru and Ibuki, right? He made his way back across the ship, but that cabin was empty. The only person still on the deck was Nagito. He hadn’t moved from his spot by the railing. Wait, no. Sonia and Gundham were over there. He approached them.

“Fuhahaha!” Gundham was saying. “Creatures of the deep are well-acquainted with solitary darkness! But even in their element, they pale next to my mastery of magic.”

“Young power is indeed in excess of all numbers,” Sonia agreed. “I wish we had such creatures in my kingdom.”

“So be it,” Gundham folded his arms. “Our kingdom will be full of them.”

“Haaah!” Sonia clasped her hands. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Um.” Hajime hated to interrupt their conversation, not that he was able to follow it all that well anyway. “Hey.”

“Hajime!” Sonia nearly jumped. “I did not notice you there.”

“Welcome, mortal,” Gundham greeted in his traditional manner. “What quest draws you here?”

“Well, I was looking for Mikan. Have either of you seen where she went?”

“The healer?” The wind blew the ends of Gundham’s scarf out behind him. “She resides in darkness.”

“I am very sorry,” Sonia exclaimed, looking entirely too apologetic for the situation. “I am afraid I have not seen her since Ibuki came and dragged her away. I believe she said something about wanting Mikan nearby while she talked to Teruteru. Perhaps he would know? I am sorry. I am not being very helpful.”

“No, it’s fine.” Hajime waved away her apology. “You don’t have to apologize for that. I’ll keep looking. Thanks.” He doubted Teruteru knew where she’d gone, and even if he did, Hajime didn’t know where he had gone. Probably to the ship’s kitchen, or possibly even to go check on the cargo to see what he could make for Ibuki’s party.

Well, it would still take them a while to reach the island. He had time.

Making his way below deck, Hajime emerged in a long hallway that looked like it belonged more in a hotel than a ship. From the room on his left, he heard the unmistakable grunts and crashes of Akane and Nekomaru sparring. Hadn’t Peko accompanied them? Hajime opened the door to peek inside only to immediately close it again to avoid a table hurtling toward him. On second thought, it was probably better to leave them be.

Empty room after empty room rewarded his search. At this point, Hajime was seriously questioning why they’d chosen to keep a ship this big. He wondered if it would be a waste of his Ultimate Analyst talent if he used it to determine where Mikan was.

Hajime.

Ah. There was a voice or thought, he guessed, that he hadn’t heard in a while. Hey, Izuru. If he couldn’t sense the other in his mind at all times, he might have been worried that he’d disappeared. Or merged. Or whatever it was that was happening to them.
Ryota’s joining you was predictable.

Hajime snorted. You didn’t stop me to tell me that. It would have been nice to know though.

He meant both statements. If the outcome had never been in doubt, he wouldn’t have had to worry. Instead he’d done nothing but worry. It wasn’t that he didn’t have faith in Nagito’s plan, but… okay, maybe he didn’t have complete faith in Nagito’s plan. Part of that might have been due to Nagito, but largely, he’d been more concerned about accounting for any other, potentially confounding variables.

Still, it was my preferred outcome.

Really?

A world where no free will exists…that must be the most boring of all.

Yeah, Haime realized. I suppose you’re right.

I usually am.

Usually? What happened to always?

Mikan is most likely with Ibuki.

Izuru’s presence receded with that, though Hajime detected his slight amusement. He was getting better at noticing Izuru’s small bursts of emotion. Annoyance, amusement, fear, joy—it wasn’t that Izuru didn’t feel such things. Even the most complicated brain surgery hadn’t succeeded in completely removing those. They were subtle, so subtle that it would probably have been impossible for anyone talking to Izuru to notice them. But Hajime could sense them. Likewise, he knew that Izuru could sense all of his emotions. Not that that was saying much. Most people seemed able to read Hajime pretty easily. That thought didn’t bother him, though sometimes, he felt it did bother Izuru. Still, it wasn’t something the other seemed comfortable talking about, so Hajime never mentioned it. Of course, Izuru knew that anyway, since he’d just thought about it, but he never brought it up either, and—gah, this was complicated.

Turning around, Hajime made his way back upstairs. If Mikan was with Ibuki, then he had a pretty good idea of where they’d be.

Sure enough, he found them in Ibuki’s cabin. Not for the first time that day, he found himself eavesdropping. He hoped this wasn’t a new bad habit he was acquiring. Ultimate Eavesdropper. Ugh.

“See, Mikan-chan? How was that?”

“P-pretty good, I g-guess,” Mikan stuttered. “But why am I the one h-h-helping with this m-music? I don’t think I’m the r-right p-person to ask.”

“CHA!” Ibuki screeched. “You’re perfect, Mikan-chan! Listen. Ibuki knows what she knows. And she knows you’re the one. So stop complaining and help me. Otherwise Ibuki will put you in her band.”

Unsure of whether or not that was a threat, Hajime hesitated for a second before knocking. He’d barely tapped the door before it swung open. “HAJIME-CHAN!” Cried Ibuki. “I haven’t seen you in ages!”
“What are you talking about?” Hajime managed to dodge her embrace this time. “You just saw me.”

“Yeah, I know.” She shrugged. “So why are you here? Kyah! Could it be? Did you come to witness our girl love?”

“What?” He and Mikan said at the same time.

Ibuki laughed. “Kidding, kidding.”

Hajime shook his head. Sometimes he wondered if Ibuki was actually more difficult to understand than Nagito. “Hey, Mikan, could you do me a favor?”

“Um.” She swallowed. “Y-y-yes, Hinata-kun.” Oh, right. He’d forgotten she still used the honorific too. Only she also fell into the Mitarai camp where he didn’t want to push her into doing anything she would be uncomfortable with. At least she’d stopped calling him ’san,’ like she had in the simulation. That was progress, right?

“Whoa!” Ibuki gasped. “Why are you taking off your apron?”

Wait, what? Sure enough, Mikan was definitely in the process of unclothing herself. “Stop, stop!” Hajime shouted, louder than he’d meant to. “What are you doing?”

“Eh?” Mikan looked horrified. “You asked me to do this, so….”

“No, no, no.” He shook his head. “You don’t have to do anything like that.”

“Oh.” She lowered her arms, but she didn’t look disappointed either. Hajime decided to take that as a good sign. “Then what d-d-did you want, Hinata-kun?”

“Mitarai asked if he could talk to you, so I told him I’d ask you. If that’s okay, I’d like you to go and…I don’t know. Help him feel welcome.” This was Mikan Tsumiki. The same Mikan Tsumiki from the simulation and Hope’s Peak, before she’d been corrupted by despair. He could trust her to do this.

“Okay,” Mikan said, and while she’d spoken with her usual timidity, a kind of confidence radiated from the line of her jaw and the steadiness of her shoulders. “He’s not sick, is he?”

“No,” Hajime reassured her. Or reassured himself—Mikan’s attitude toward sick people still frightened him a little. He hoped Naegi had included medicine with the other supplies. “He just wants to talk to you.”

“Okay,” she said again, and without another word, she hurried out of the room.

“HAJIME-CHAN!” Ibuki yelled again. “Headbang with me!”

“Sorry, Ibuki, I have to go, ah, do…things.” Fumbling for an excuse, he ducked out of the room. Ibuki had already gotten him to do an obscene amount of headbangs once; he saw no need to try again. All he’d gotten out of that was a headache.

He let a cool sea breeze whisper through his hair. It seemed like everyone was doing well. For the most part. Mitarai and Fuyuhiko both needed some time, but Hajime really wasn’t sure what he could do for them. When Fuyuhiko wanted to be alone, talking to him was impossible, and he didn’t know Mitarai well enough to venture into deeper conversations with him. In that moment, a wealth of gratitude for Ibuki swept over him. She was still the same as ever. If anything, she was
being even more cheerful than usual.

That left…Nagito. The white-haired boy still hadn’t moved from his spot on the railing, and he nearly had the entire deck to himself. On the other side of the ship, Hajime saw Mahiru and Hiyoko taking pictures of the ocean. Sonia and Gundham had disappeared. He made a mental note to ask Kazuichi how he was doing. Sonia and Gundham’s relationship seemed obvious to everyone except them, but that didn’t stop Kazuichi from moaning about it. Sometimes Hajime really worried about the Ultimate Mechanic.

“Hajime!” Mahiru waved at him. Nagito turned at the shout, saw Hajime, and stepped away from the railing. Hajime made his way over to Mahiru. Before he could even return her greeting, she shoved her camera into his hands. “Would you take a picture of Hiyoko and me?”

“Yaaaay!” Hiyoko threw her arms into the air. Her gesture looked considerably stranger when she had a body which matched her age. “Big Bro Hajime’s going to take our picture!”

Big…Bro? Ah…better to just leave that one alone. “Yeah, I don’t mind.” He peered through the camera. The shot didn’t look quite right. Remembering the last time Mahiru had asked him to do this, he took a step forward. She nodded approvingly. Hajime gave her a weak smile and lifted the camera. As Hiyoko and Mahiru appeared in the viewfinder, Hajime bent slightly to try and improve the angle. The sea glittered behind them like fluttering snow suspended in the light of a streetlamp. He took the picture.

Mahriu retrieved the camera and hung it around her neck. “Thanks, Hajime.” A faint pink dusted her cheeks. “You’re pretty good at that.”

Taken aback by the compliment, Hajime’s response was delayed. “…thanks.”

“Awww,” Hiyoko moaned, “why are we wasting time with Hajime? Come on, Mahiru! I wanna practice a few moves for Ibuki’s party.”

“Right, right,” Mahiru nodded. She gave Hajime a slight shrug. “We’ll see you later.”

“Yeah. Later.”

As they started walking away, Hajime was struck by a sudden impulse. “Hey, Mahiru?”

She turned back. “What?”

Her tone wasn’t aggressive, but it definitely wasn’t inviting either. This was more like the Mahiru he remembered. “Do you think…maybe, when Mitarai comes out, you can help him…integrate?”

That was a terrible choice of words.

Judging by her expression, Mahiru agreed, but she did give him a small smile. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

She nodded. Hiyoko grabbed her hand and pulled her away before she could say anything else, though Hajime doubted whether she would have even if she’d stayed. Mahiru had always been strong-willed. But she’d also been kind, and she did her best to take care of everyone. Sort of like he was doing now.

With them gone, the only other person up here was Nagito. The other boy had resumed his station at the railing. After what had just happened with the Future Foundation and meeting Naegi, Nagito
might be feeling more talkative. Either way, Hajime was tired of their game of cat-and-mouse. Especially since he had no idea which was which. Fine then. He’d cast himself as the cat this time.

Hajime moved to stand behind Nagito. Trying to act as nonchalant as possible, he gripped both sides of the railing, trapping the boy between it and his own body. Nagito’s shoulders lifted slightly but didn’t slump back down. Outside of that one instance in the lobby, when Nagito had freaked out about the prospect of being tied up, the only time Hajime saw Nagito express any discomfort was when he didn’t know what to say or when he touched him. His body language might have suggested discomfort or nervousness. Hajime immediately regretted his decision. But he couldn’t back off now.

“Your plan went well,” Hajime said.

“Aha, do you think so?” Nagito’s metal hand whirred as it disappeared beneath his coat. “It makes me so happy to hear you say that.”

Hajime had to remind himself that this kind of praise wasn’t sarcastic. Not from Nagito. It would have sounded that way coming from any normal teenager, but then…well, none of them were normal.

“Did you know about Mitarai?”

“Mitarai-kun?” The question hovered in the air. “What would I have known about him, Hinata-kun?”

“Didn’t I tell you to stop that?”

“Forgive me, Hinata.” He tucked his neck in. His white hair flailed in the wind. He was just asking to be forgiven for his slip of the tongue, but the words once again reminded Hajime of everything that had happened in the simulation. Of the terrified look on his corpse and Chiaki’s small smile of resignation.

“I thought this would be different.” Nagito’s tone had dropped several degrees, but he still hadn’t turned around. Hajime peered over to try and see his face, but Nagito looked away. “But it was the same as always.”

“The same…as always?”

“Hope against hope.” Nagito sighed. “Mitarai-kun against all of you. And the stronger hope won.”

“But we’re all still alive,” Hajime pointed out. “Isn’t that hope?”

Nagito shook his head slightly. “But you sacrificed a lot. Your reputations, and with them, your chances for redemption.”

“That’s not—”

“Even if that’s not a sacrifice in your mind, Hinata, can you say the same for the others?” He hadn’t realized before, but Nagito was trembling. “Aren’t they all scattered right now because they’re trying to overcome the despair of that sacrifice? Isn’t that when people turn to their friends the most?”

“Maybe,” Hajime said. Since when did other people’s definitions of hope matter to Nagito?

Nagito sighed. “It would seem a hope without sacrifice or despair is impossible after all.”
“So quick to give up.” The wind was starting to get to him now. He wished he had a coat too.
“Weren’t we going to keep looking for it together? And if we can’t find it, then all we have to do is
create it ourselves, right? Don’t you believe we can do that?”

“Oh.” Nagito peeked at him over his shoulder. “I was hoping you would say something like that,
Hinata.” Of course he was. The whole thing had just been another one of Nagito’s elaborate mind
games. Perhaps he’d been the cat this whole time. Hajime’s grip on the railing tightened.

“You should be careful,” Nagito observed. “With my luck, the ship could well sink.”

His luck? Hajime had nearly forgotten about it for a moment. He’d have thought helping save the
world would be good luck, but based on the way Nagito talked about it, he may have felt like it
was the reverse.

“Doesn’t Izuru have luck too? Which means I do as well. So as long as that’s the case, I don’t
think you need to worry about your luck.”

Nagito twitched. Hajime had a distinct feeling that if he wasn’t trapped in place, he would leave.
That thought paralyzed him. He didn’t want to force the other into doing anything, but on the other
hand, Nagito seemed unlikely to end up saying anything on his own. He tended to keep quiet about
the things which caused him discomfort or pain. Hajime related to that tendency. At the same time
though, he knew the reasons both of them did that couldn’t be more different.

As his conflicting feelings resolved, Hajime lowered his arms and stepped back. Nagito moved, but
not quickly enough to conceal the way his face softened or his shoulders lowered as his tension
deflated. He didn’t leave however. He stood there, hands thrust into his coat pockets, swaying
gently with the wind. The water continued glistening behind him. Something about the way the
light glanced off it reflected onto Nagito. His skin, normally limp-white and lifeless, almost
looked…healthy.

“Hinata.” His voice fluttered on the air. Hajime could practically see his brain turning, calculating,
trying to give shape to the words he wanted to say. “Do you really believe that?”

“Well, have you had any bad luck since you’ve woken up?” Nagito’s eyes widened, and he
immediately dropped his gaze. Maybe that wasn’t a fair question, since it had only been a few days.
But as he racked his brains, the only possible exception Hajime could think of was their recent
mission to save the Future Foundation. He definitely didn’t consider that bad luck. Did Nagito?

Hajime decided he spent unhealthy amounts of time trying to figure out how Nagito felt and
thought. He wasn’t some kind of psychic. He wished the other would just tell him. This was so
frustrating!

“I have to use the bathroom,” Nagito murmured. An obvious lie. Hajime deliberated on whether or
not to push him on that before deciding against it.

“Go on then.” He watched as that head of white-hair retreated into the depths of the ship.
Something about his expression at Hajime’s last question suggested that he’d been deeply
bothered. Why was it so weird that he hadn’t had any bad luck? Based on the way Nagito had
described his cycle, the only answer Hajime could imagine was that Nagito was waiting for it. But
to actually live that way—always anticipating the worst. That must be horrible.

At the same time, nothing Hajime said seemed to be making any difference. Sometimes he felt like
he might as well be talking to a wall for all the good he was doing. Every time he thought that, he
had to swallow that impatience. Last time they’d talked, Nagito had said he was really happy,
hadn’t he? Surely that counted for something.

He’d been reluctant to do so before, but maybe he should ask Naegi for advice. Before leaving, the Future Foundation had given all of them cellular phones. Nobody said it was to stop Nagito from stealing it again, but Hajime couldn’t shake the feeling that that had been the catalyst behind that decision.

Before that, though….

He dialed his home phone number. Slowly, slowly, he brought the phone to his ear.

‘The number you have dialed is disconnected.’

Yeah, he’d expected that. He hung up. The cold stoicism behind that voice nauseated him. It vaguely resembled the way Izuru talked, only not quite. He pocketed the phone and looked out across the ocean. In a short while, they would arrive at Jabberwock Island. The place where all of this had begun, ended, and begun again. What they would do after they got there, after they partied, he didn’t know. There was still a lot of chaos and violence cascading through the world. Hajime knew that everyone wanted to do something about that. Being internationally wanted criminals meant that they’d have to operate from the shadows. But that wouldn’t be enough to stop them. They were a family now. Sure, there were still a few wrinkles to smooth out, but they were still a family. If anything united them, it was their future.

The future they would face together.

…………………………

Elsewhere on the open ocean, the Spirit of Justice swept through waves like they were bits of paper. It was an immense cruiser, designed for luxury transport but, in light of the Biggest, Most Awful, Most Tragic Event in Human History, it had been modified to carry heavy weaponry. The Future Foundation had originally planned to use it to reach Towa City and discover what was happening there, but by the time any real decisions were made, they’d re-established contact with Byakuya Togami and determined that the action would be unnecessary. So it had been redeployed to seek out the Remnants of Despair in other parts of the world.

Of course, in the chaos of despair, keeping track of a single cruiser could be…difficult. Especially when it was former Future Foundation operatives who had stolen it.

“I wonder,” one figure said to another, “how do you think the worst criminals in the history of mankind are at killing?” The figure had not elected to stand outside in the open air. Instead, they were in their cabin’s closet, speaking through the door as if afraid of showing their face. Or, perhaps, they were doing something else.

The other figure stood in the center of the room and said nothing about their companion’s location. “I told you. The only reason I’m doing this is because they’re the Remnants of Despair. They’ve just destroyed the Future Foundation, and they’re trying to plunge the world into despair once again. You know what I’ve told you. Enough is enough. I suppose this is ironic, isn’t it?”

“I hope they’re passionate.” The figure in the closet disregarded their comrade’s statements. “So many people aren’t. I think it’s important to like what you do. It’s important to have conviction. Otherwise….

“Like what you do?” The second person scuffed a shoe against the floor. “I can’t believe you.”

“Would you like it better if I dressed this up and called this justice?”
“We have everything prepared, right?” No answer. By now, the second person knew their partner well enough to know what that meant. “Good. I mean it though. This will be the last time.”

“I wonder about that too. And I wonder whether any of them know Ikusaba. If they were together for a while...I should like to see if her influence is there too.” The third figure piped up, sitting on the bed and swinging their legs lightly back and forth.

“It’s not about justice to you.” Disgust crept into the second figure’s voice.

“Your definition of justice is weak,” retorted the first. “That’s all.” Number two shook their head but allowed the remark to fly unopposed. They were so tired. They’d tried everything to get their friend to see the results of his style of thinking. They still felt the weight of the knife in their hand and the warmth of the blood as it spilled down their fingers. And the look on her face when they had plunged the knife into her back—that wasn’t something they would ever forget. ‘I was trying to help’ wasn’t an acceptable excuse after that.

At that point, hadn’t the decision already been made? It’s not like the past could be undone. There was no going back now.

Once more, then. For shining justice.

Number of Students: 16

Chapter End Notes

So this is where things may get a bit more...fanfiction-y. Now that I'm post-canon, that is. As was hinted in this chapter, there will still be tons of character interactions and development (and romance). The heart of this story remains what it always was even as the situation changes.

Essentially, feel free to think of everything after Chapter 16 as a second arc or the second part in a series.

Ryota Mitarai, how do I write for you?

Thank you all so, so, so, so, so much for reading! It makes me happy beyond words when I see how people are enjoying this story. As always, please feel free to let me know what you liked or didn’t like or what you’d want to see in the future.

And of course, Happy New Year! And Happy Birthday to Hajime Hinata! This one’s for you.
“Oh, thank God!” Hiyoko cried as she fled from the ship. Falling to her knees, she scooped up handfuls of sand and tossed them into the air. “Trying to dance on a moving boat made me sooo seasick!”

“Easy, Hiyoko.” Mahiru disembarked next and made her way over to the Ultimate Traditional Dancer. Squatting next to her, she rubbed her back. “There now. See? We’re back.”

“Obviously,” Hiyoko moaned. “I never thought I would miss this place, but anything’s better than that ship.”

“Hmm.” Nagito, still onboard, tapped a metal finger against the railing. “I like ships. More than planes anyway.”

“Nobody cares about what you like,” Hiyoko scoffed.

“So what now?” Kazuichi asked as he stepped onto the island.

“NOW WE PARTY-HARDY!” Ibuki cheered.

“Whawhawhawha?” Teruteru shook his head. “No, no, I need time to cook first!”

“Yeah, give him time!” Akane agreed instantly. “I wanna eat! There’s no party without food!”

“Aaaah!” Sonia was nearly jumping with excitement. “I would love to help set up a party. In my kingdom, I often attended such celebrations, but I was never allowed to plan any of them. I would like to have such an experience.”

Gundham chuckled. “Then, my Dark Lady, let our schemes flourish!”

Hajime watched as everyone receded back into the island. It was almost as if they’d never left in the first place. Either word of mouth really had spread that quickly, or else Ibuki had managed to track down everyone on the boat and sell them on her party idea. Neither possibility would have surprised Hajime. Still, it would have been nice if some of them had stayed to help unload their supplies. He was left with Akane and Nekomaru and, surprisingly, Teruteru.

They’d decided to hold the party in the area around the pool and the hotel lobby. Nekomaru and Hiyoko had wanted to hold it on the beach so they could build a huge bonfire, but Akane pointed out that it would be tedious to transport the dishes all the way there and back. No one bothered to ask where they’d get the wood. At the same time, without the threat of Monokuma looming over everyone (or maybe with the shadow of what had happened last time), no one wanted to party in the Old Building. The poolside seemed like the best of both worlds.

“OI!” Nekomaru bustled past him, carrying a crate that was nearly as large as he was. “Lend us a hand, Hajime!”

“Oh, right! Sorry.” Feeling himself blush, Hajime busied himself with helping Nekomaru and Akane unload the ship. He couldn’t help feeling like a third wheel the entire time. Neither Akane nor Nekomaru seemed to notice it, but the way they gravitated toward each other made it obvious.
He couldn’t help remembering how Fuyuhiko had tried to talk Akane into expressing her feelings, and how Akane had completely missed the entire point of that conversation. But after what she’d said when she helped bring Nagito back to his cottage, Hajime had hoped that maybe she and Nekomaru would be able to do something.

Then again, maybe now was not a good time. Teruteru was on the beach directing the food toward the kitchen, despite not actually doing anything to help transport it there. It would be nice if he decided to help.

“Yo,” Akane shouted at him. “Aren’t you gonna help us?” Hajime hid a smile. It was comforting to know that they could still be on the same page.

“Eh?” Teruteru looked shocked. “But I’m going to be cooking all of this, right? I won’t even use any iron skewers this time. There’s only one right way to skewer flesh, and it’s not with an iron stick. I can tell you that much. Hmhmhmhm!”

“Mmmm.” Akane scratched her head. “So are you gonna help or not?”

Teruteru made a sound somewhere between a scream and a screech, picked up a small box, and dashed off toward the kitchen, nearly losing his chef’s hat in the process. He shouted something that vaguely sounded like the name of a current pop idol. Hajime made his way back onto the ship to check the storeroom. He passed Nagito, who had yet to disembark. No one had asked him to help move anything, and while Hajime would have liked to pretend that was because of his frail condition, he knew better.

The storeroom looked a lot bigger empty. Without the crates, boxes, and other storage units, the room felt almost cold, despite being larger than the dining room in the Old Building. In fact, having a whole ship parked next to the island felt unsettling. He didn’t think anyone would take it and try to sail anywhere. It just felt weird knowing that they could do that at any time. After being trapped here in the simulation and then agreeing to be trapped here after graduating, it just…felt strange. That was it. He couldn’t explain why, but that didn’t bother him. In fact, it actually did the reverse. Not knowing made him simultaneously anxious and more relaxed. This was going to take a while to get used to.

“Hmph.” Nekomaru crossed his arms. “Looks like we’re all done here.”

Hajime cast his gaze around the empty room once more. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Excellent!” Nekomaru uncrossed his arms just so he could slam his fists together. “We must allow the spirit of this party to soar!”

“Spirit?” Hajime couldn’t help picturing Gundham folding his arms and cackling.

“That’s right.” The Ultimate Team Manager nodded. “We’re all alive, Hajime. That counts for everything. To tell you the truth, after I first woke up, I thought the same thing. Nothing else mattered to me at that moment. Not having been murdered. Not my memories of my time as Ultimate Despair. Just being alive. Because as long as you’re alive, well, you can do anything. Wouldn’t you say?”

He really was amazing. The thought slipped through Hajime’s mind.

“Your praise astounds me.” Oh, right. Hajime had forgotten that the other had an uncanny knowledge of when other people thought well of him. Nekomaru released a boisterous laugh. “I’m only speaking from the heart. Hmm. Yes. That may be a little thing, but it’s something everyone
can and should do. The spirit of who we are dwells within us all. The bond between a manager and his athletes is a beautiful thing. Hah, Hajime, you feel something similar now, don’t you? I’m sure you understand. Hmm. Yes. Some things are felt, but all things need to be said. That is where all roads lead, Hajime.”

Hajime, for his part, had long last track of this conversation. He had no idea what point Nekomaru was trying to make. “Didn’t you once say all roads lead to managers?”

“That too.” He laughed again. “All of us manage something, Hajime. Some better and some worse, but all of us have something we can do. And as long as we’re alive, we can discover what that is. That is why we must keep marching forward. MARCHING FORWARD!”

“Nekomaru!” Akane’s shout reached them from outside. “Look at this! I’ve got three boxes on my own.”

“HAH!” The loud man called back. “Three? That’s nothing to boast about. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

The ship seemed to shake and rattle as Nekomaru stomped back through it. Hajime trailed after him. It was just better to be alive, huh? As long as they did that, they could sort out everything else on their own. That certainly made sense, but…what about Izuru? Regardless of whether or not he could be called ‘alive’ at the present, he’d said he was going to disappear or merge with him completely. More than that, Izuru had said that he could do nothing to prevent it. If he couldn’t, if someone like him couldn’t…was it really better to be alive if the only thing waiting for you was death?

Because of my self-righteous thoughts, everyone distanced themselves from me. I was fine with that while I was still healthy, but it’s quite lonely to die alone.

Nagito’s words leaked into his mind. Izuru must feel the same.

Izuru…isn’t there anything I can do to help you?

No response. Truthfully, he hadn’t expected one. That didn’t stop bitter disappointment from pooling in his mouth. What had changed? Really, what? It was Izuru who saved all his classmates. Meanwhile, he was the same powerless Hajime Hinata that he’d despised for so long. He couldn’t do anything.

No, that wasn’t true. He’d saved the survivors in the simulation. He’d just helped save the world. He wasn’t powerless at all. He was trying to do better. To be better. And yet…and yet, Izuru was wasting away, trapped in his own mind, and he couldn’t do anything to help. How was he supposed to accept that?

“Hinata?”

He glanced up in time to see Nagito lower his hand back to his side, despite not actually having touched him. It was like the other boy had reached out only to pull back. A smile graced his pale features. “Are you okay? You look troubled.”

“Honestly?” Hajime sighed. “I was thinking about how I can save Izuru. Or how I can’t, I guess.” He regretted his words instantly. Nagito would use this as another opportunity to scorn him for having weak hope, and that kind of creepy rambling was the last thing he wanted to hear.

“Kamukura-kun?” Nagito shrugged. “Someone like me couldn’t possibly know about that.” Well, it wasn’t a hope monologue, but it was the next worst thing. A clear insult. Hajime bit back his
‘knock it off.’ It wasn’t Nagito’s fault he felt like this. Not really.

“Look, Nagito, you’re not trash, okay?”

“Instead of surviving by doubting others, isn’t it better to die believing in others?” Nagito tilted his head. “Do you know what I meant when I said that? If you believe in someone, doesn’t that mean you have hope in them?”

Hajime had no interest in humoring Nagito’s obsession. Sidestepping the other, he exited the ship. Everyone’s footprints lay scattered about on the beach. Hajime’s joined them. Tiny clouds of sand danced across his sneaker. Based on the way his next step felt, some of it had gotten inside. He shook his shoe irritably, which of course did nothing. Taking it off here would only increase the amount of sand that got inside.

Once he’d made it to his cottage, Hajime threw himself on his bed. A crushing tiredness squashed his mind like one of the ants Hiyoko enjoyed tormenting. Before he knew it, he knew nothing.

“Hajime.” Chiaki floated before him. Her arms rose at her sides, and her smile looked as warm and inviting as a hot spring. Her adorable hoody was down. He reached out to her, but his hand passed right through, as if she were nothing but steam. Her expressions bent slightly, and she shook her head.

“Chiaki…is it really you?” He’d been so afraid after what she said in his nightmare, that he would never see her again, but when she’d appeared on the boat, that worry had faded into the background. But there had been such a sense of finality there. As if it had been her final goodbye. Even if it had just been Izuru’s Ultimate Analyst Talent predicting what she would have said, he would have been okay with that. He’d been prepared to accept it then. But for her to appear, now, like this—it wasn’t fair.

Closing her eyes, she gave a short, single nod. A glowing white light washed over her body. It grew and grew in intensity until Hajime was forced to shield his eyes. When he could see again, Chiaki was gone. He stood before an empty fountain. He heard water gurgling into it, but when he looked, there wasn’t an ounce of liquid to be seen. A small grove of trees surrounded him. Their spindly limbs waved in the wind. Whether that wave signaled a greeting or farewell eluded Hajime. He spun around, but everywhere he looked, the scene remained the same.

“CHIAKI!”

He sat bolt upright. Sweat dripped down the back of his neck. His blanket had curled around one leg; his other lay exposed on the bed. Gripping his head in his hands, he tried to calm his breathing.

“Hinata?”

The sound of that breathy voice nearly sent him back into panic mode. Nagito sat on his couch with a book in his lap. Hajime glared at him for a few seconds. Nagito stared back, concern written across his face. “Hinata? Are you okay?”

“What are you doing here?”

Nagito smiled. “I can completely understand why you’d be upset to find trash like me here. But, you see, we left in a hurry, and my sheets and room were still full of blood. Nobody wanted to touch that, of course, so I’m airing out the room right now. The sheets are hung out to dry. I’ve already washed them. Ah, not that I minded. I didn’t have anywhere to stay, but then I realized that you’d already been tolerating my presence in here before, so I thought maybe I could wait here.
Just for a few hours until my room was ready. I could wait in the library if you prefer, Hinata. It’s a bit cold in there, but I’m sure I can—"

“Enough.” Hearing the other talk this much this quickly was starting to give him a headache. “Enough—it’s fine.”

“Ahaha, of course. I’m sorry.” He fell silent. Hajime glanced at him. He hadn’t picked up his book again. Instead he was staring out the window. Hajime followed his gaze. The sun hovered in the sky like an overripe fruit. Even juice appeared to be dripping out of its body, like someone had squeezed it too tightly. Its resemblance to blood unsettled him, and he looked away again.

“What are you reading?” Hajime asked to take his mind away from blood and Chiaki. The two did not combine in a way he wanted to think about.

“Mmm.” Nagito raised the book with his artificial arm. “A compilation of Japanese fairy tales. Earlier, I said that I liked these kinds of stories because they were full of hope. But either English stories are different, or my mom was just reading a kid-friendly version. So many of these are just…sad. You know these, right, Hinata?” He waved the book. “The monkey and the crab?”

Indeed, Hajime knew the story. A monkey traded a persimmon seed to a crab for a dumpling, thinking to make a quick gain. The crab planted the seed, and it grew a large tree. But the crab could not climb it to get the fruit, so it asked the monkey for help. The monkey climbed the tree and ate all the best fruits. It threw the unripe ones at the crab and eventually killed it. The crab’s children and their friends devised a plan and killed the monkey in retribution. He supposed that wasn’t exactly the most hopeful message.

“So many of these are so violent,” Nagito murmured. “Almost sad in their simplicity. A raccoon kills a farmer’s wife, and the farmer enlists the aid of a rabbit to torture and kill the raccoon. My Lord Bag of Rice defends the Dragon King by killing a monstrous centipede. Even Momotarou slays a number of demons.” The book fell to the floor. Nagito clicked his tongue.

“Not that Western ones are much better. In ‘The White Snake,’ a servant, curious about a dish the king eats in secret, takes a look and discovers that it was a white snake. He tries it and discovers that eating it gave him the power to talk to animals. Sometime later, he’s about to be executed under suspicion of stealing a ring from the queen, but he hears a duck mention that he ate it, so he has the duck killed, and they find the ring. The servant sets out after this, saving other animals—returning some fish to the water, turning his horse away from trampling on ants, killing that horse to feed some starving birds. He finds a distant princess, who will only marry him if he completes three tasks—retrieving a ring from the bottom of the sea, restoring ten bags worth of seeds from where they’d been scattered on the ground, and grabbing the apple from the Tree of Life. All of the animals he saved help him do this, and they get married and live happily ever after.”

“But isn’t that strange?” Hajime, who had been mostly paying attention but not entirely, glanced at him. Something in his tone had changed. “It’s like the story doesn’t even care that the main character is a complete hypocrite. Murdering some animals while helping others with no real distinction. It sends mixed signals, doesn’t it? But this is the kind of stuff we teach children. Oh, we edit them, of course. But even so.” He sighed.

“Is there a point to this?” Hajime hadn’t meant that to sound as bluntly dismissive as it had, but he genuinely had no idea why Nagito was rambling on and on about children’s stories. Now that he was talking about something completely inconsequential, it seemed like Nagito had no intention of being cryptic or silent.

Nagito lowered his head. “Do you have a favorite fairy tale, Hinata?”
“…Why?” He didn’t see any harm in answering the question, but this was Nagito after all. He couldn’t see any way the information could be used for planning a murder or anything serious like that. Actually, if he was being completely honest with himself, he wasn’t even sure he had an answer. “The Hare of Inaba, maybe, or perhaps Kintaro. As a kid, I admired him.”

“Yeah,” Nagito murmured. “Yeah, that makes sense.” He bent down and picked up the book. “I guess those stories are a bit more…a bit nicer.”

“Why does that matter?”

Nagito peered at the window again. “The party should be starting soon. You should go check on everyone. Make sure they’re ready.”

Something about the way he said that raised a question. “Are you not coming?”

“I know my place,” Nagito said evenly. There wasn’t a hint of sadness in his voice or posture, but still, Hajime couldn’t shake the idea that he said with a sense of melancholic loneliness. “I’m sure everyone would be happier if I didn’t attend.”

“What are you saying?” Hajime got out of the bed. His muscles groaned with relief as he stretched. “You’re one of us.”

The faintest hint of pink dusted Nagito’s cheeks, and he glanced away. Hajime sighed. “Well, if you’re uncomfortable, I won’t force you.” Sliding into his shoes, he departed the cottage. The still water of the swimming pool reflected the lights from Hotel Mirai’s lobby. Many of the lounging chairs had been pushed over to one side. A speaker had been set on the stairs leading to the hotel, with an extension cord going further inside. That probably meant Ibuki had a song or two in mind. Great. This had gone from a party to a satanic ritual.

He passed Mahiru, who was heading toward the cottages. She gave him a small smile and nod. He watched her turn toward the boys’ side and head over to the cottage where the Ultimate Imposter and Mitarai had shut themselves in. If anyone was capable of summoning those two, it was her. Even in the simulation, she’d been the one who dragged a struggling Kazuichi back to the restaurant.

Speaking of Kazuichi, the Ultimate Mechanic had just exited the restaurant. His shark-like teeth parted as he saw Hajime. He wore a simple white t-shirt and—Hajime thanked every spiritual deity in existence—a legitimate swimsuit as opposed to that monstrosity of a speedo. “Hey!” He waved. “You think any of the girls will show up in swimsuits?” Ugh, of course. At least Teruteru, cooking inside the Old Building, hadn’t heard that exclamation.

The image of Chiaki in a cream-white bathing suit flashed before his eyes. He blinked it away. “Come on, soul brother!” Kazuichi strutted down the stairs toward him. “Don’t lie to yourself. You’re excited too.”

“Yeah, sure,” Hajime replied. “At least we’re not waiting in a diner for an hour this time.”

“Yeah.” Kazuichi removed his beanie and tossed it carelessly toward the hotel. “I don’t have to feel like Teruteru this time. It kinda bothered me a little, you know? But when it comes to Miss Sonia, I just can’t help myself.”

“You really should try,” Hajime said. For his part, he was trying not to sound too insensitive. “I think she and Gundham are happy together.”
“That’s right!” Kazuichi stood straighter. “I saw a small turtle on the beach earlier. Maybe Miss Sonia would like to see it!”

“I don’t think—” Hajime began, but Kazuichi had already taken off. He felt a strong urge to face palm.

“Where is he off to?” A quiet voice asked. Hajime jumped; he hadn’t noticed Peko standing right behind him until she’d spoken. With her gray-white hair and harsh red eyes, she didn’t exactly blend in very well. Actually she hadn’t changed clothes at all. No sign of the swimming suit she’d had in the simulation. Or…any swimwear, really.

“Um.” Hajime collected his thoughts. “He’s off another futile quest.”

“Ah.” The Ultimate Swordswoman stroked her chin as she thought. “I imagine unrequited love must be difficult to deal with.”

“I don’t know if it’s love,” Hajime said. Something about Kazuichi’s infatuation with Sonia felt… wrong. It didn’t seem like love to him. Not that he had much experience with the subject.

“What about you?”

“Huh?” The way Peko stared at him made him want to take a step back. “What do you mean?”

“What would you do if you loved someone and they didn’t love you back?”

That was a rather deep question for a night of partying and celebration. Hajime shrugged. “I really don’t know. I mean, I can’t really say how I’d react until that was actually happening. I like to think I’d take it well, but I’m sure most people would say the same thing.”

Peko hummed but said nothing further on the subject. Hajime was grateful for that. After a few minutes, the other Ultimates began turning up. Mikan was placing towels on some of the pool chairs. Akane and Nekomaru emerged from the hotel restaurant, carrying one of the large tables between them. They navigated their way to the side of the pool, where they set up the table just in time for Teruteru to emerge from the kitchen and begin loading it with plates of food. Akane wanted to help carry it out, but Nekomaru, realizing that she would just eat it all herself, made her wait outside while he did it.

“He’s pretty smart,” Akane admitted. “I dunno if I could have helped myself. It’s just so good, and I’m sooooo hungry.”

“Hungry?” Ibuki popped up as if she’d been waiting in a hole in the ground for someone to say that. “Hunger means excitement, you know.” She winked. “Some people get tired when they’re hungry or full, but not Ibuki!”

“I don’t believe you ever get tired,” Peko remarked.

Ibuki laughed. “That may be true.”

Hiyoko made her way toward them, clutching a bag of gummy candies in one fist. She wore a kimono, which also seemed entirely inappropriate for swimming. Then again, the pool wasn’t really that big. Hajime had no plans to swim himself, and the idea of fifteen Ultimates jumping in there seemed more like a nightmare than a party.

“Eh?” She stopped short at seeing the assembled students. “Where’s Mahiru?”
“Right behind you,” the redhead said in her ear.

Rather than jump, Hiyoko turned around and threw her arms around her. “Yay! Big Sis Mahiru made it!” Awkwardly patting her back, Mahiru nodded at Hajime. He released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Mitarai would be coming. That was a promising sign. Just for once, it would be nice not to worry about anything.

“WAAAAAAAH!” A splash replaced the scream. Mikan had somehow managed to trip and fall into the pool. Despite that, this was still one of the least compromising positions she’d been in. At least she was wearing all her clothes. Or—maybe that was a bad thing, given that they were soaked.

“Oh!” Akane shouted. “We haven’t even started yet.”

It was difficult to tell if Mikan was crying or if that was pool water dripping down her face. She rubbed her eyes, which probably only spread more water around. “I’m sorry,” she wailed.

“KYAAAH!” Ibuki leapt into the pool as well. Hajime stepped back to avoid getting water splashed over his shoes and pants. Ibuki half-swam and half-walked over to Mikan. She seemed determined to throw as much water out of the pool as possible in the process. Reaching her side, Ibuki helped pick her up and guide her out of the pool.

“That was cold!” Ibuki exclaimed as they left the water.

“I’m so sorry!” Mikan continued wailing.

“Shhhhh.” Ibuki grabbed one of the towels and wrapped it around Mikan’s shoulders. “That was awesome, Mikan-chan. You gave me inspiration for a new song. So cheer up. I thought it was wonderful. You’re a better diver than—kyah! Ibuki doesn’t know any divers! Hajime-chan!”

“…Why me? What makes you think I know any?”

“Does Izuru know any?”

Did she just—really? Peko’s expression remained blank, and Akane wasn’t even paying attention, but Hajime saw his own surprise reflected on Mahiru’s face. Even Mikan fell silent, staring wide-eyed at Ibuki as if she’d dropped a bombshell. Which, to be honest, she had.

“Um, I, uh, I don’t think Izuru would want to be bothered about something like that.”

Ibuki groaned. “We should ask Aoi-chan! Oh, now Ibuki’s all wet.” Yeah. That was what happened when you jumped into the water. “I have to go change for my song anyway. Ibuki awaaaaay!” She ran back toward her cottage. There was no stopping her. They would hear a death ballad today, and that would be that.

“We have arrived,” announced a commanding voice that could only belong to the Ultimate Imposter. Sure enough, he and Mitarai were approaching. Mitarai was glancing over his shoulder at Ibuki. It was kind of strange seeing the two of them side-by-side. They looked like twins…and they didn’t at the same time.

“Hmhmhm!” Teruteru emerged from the Old Building. Nekomaru appeared behind him, carrying more trays worth of food than Hajime would have thought possible. “Due to our current situation, I couldn’t be as extravagant as an occasion like this deserves. However, I think you’ll find that all of my dishes are world-class. Although, should you desire a dish of another caliber, feel free to come see me.”
“Gross!” Hiyoko screeched.

“No!” Teruteru actually looked insulted. “They’re quite delicious!”

“Awesome!” Akane gave a wide grin. “I can start eatin’ now, yeah?”

“Hang on,” Mahiru said, glancing around. “Where are the others? You know, Sonia and Gundham?” Even in the not-quite darkness, Hajime could see her blushing. “And…Fuyuhiko and Nagito?”

Now that she mentioned it…it was strange that Sonia and Gundham weren’t here. Sonia especially. She’d been so excited about helping set up the party. And Fuyuhiko…Hajime glanced sideways at Peko, but she stared pointedly into the sky.

“Eh?” Hiyoko stuck out her lower lip. “Who cares about them? Let’s start already!”

“FUHAHAHA!” That familiar laugh directed everyone’s attention back toward the hotel lobby. Gundham stood before its entryway, dressed in…a tuxedo? Where had he found that? Or where had Sonia found it? “Behold, mortals! I present to you—your eternal Queen!”

A spotlight from within the hotel itself blasted on. It looked like Kazuichi had been in on the plan too. The poor guy. Then Sonia appeared, and Hajime couldn’t stop staring. The dress she wore looked like it had been stolen from an animated princess movie. She appeared more regal than she ever had before—and that was saying something. Sonia had always possessed a charm and grace befitting of her title as the Ultimate Princess. Perhaps seeing her look the part wasn’t that big a surprise after all.

“Hello, everyone!” In startling contrast to how made up her appearance was, Sonia’s long blonde hair flowed freely down her back. That lent a greater sincerity to her face and features. He could have stared at her forever.

“Wah!” Hiyoko’s exclamation tore through the night. “Where’d you find that getup?” Given her own state of dress, the question felt a bit hypocritical.

Sonia smiled. “I have had it since we got to the island. I was simply saving it for a special occasion. To tell you the truth, I did not imagine I would be able to wear this. So I am very glad to make the most of this opportunity. I hope that all of you will do the same as well.”

“An excellent decision.” The Ultimate Imposter agreed in Twogami’s iron tone. “This is the kind of party where we can truly have a bond. I received no threats of murder this time, I promise you.”

“What?” Mitarai stepped back. “Murder threats?”

“It’s nothing.” The larger Mitarai folded his arms. They really needed to find a new name for him. “This party is perfectly safe.”

“Oh…okay then.”

“Hey, Mitarai-kun.” Mahiru gave him a warm smile. “I wanted to show you some of my photographs.”

“Photographs?”

“Yeah.” Unslinging her camera from around her neck, she extended it toward him. “Given your talent, I was curious to hear your thoughts on these.”
"You want to know what I think?"

Instead of responding with ‘you’re a man, aren’t you? Be more forceful!’ Mahiru simply clasped her hands together and cocked her head. “Yes please.” Hajime couldn’t tell if that was because she was trying to go easy on him or because the subject matter concerned her photographs. She always got much more personable when those were involved. Most of them really were amazing, though Hajime understood that desire for validation. He’d felt the same way for his entire life. Hell, he’d thrown away his life for it.

Thinking about the past just made him anxious. Tonight was a night to forget all that. They deserved this. A night to themselves, for themselves. They were a family now.

“Let’s PARTY!” Nekomaru roared. A cheer went up from the other Ultimates, and just like that, the party was on in full force. It resembled the way everyone had been acting when they’d first arrived on the island back in the simulation. Unlike then, Hajime didn’t have a feeling of foreboding. Seeing everyone enjoying themselves—watching Mahiru and Mitarai croon over different photographs, Twogami and Akane engage in an eating contest, and Nekomaru and Gundham arm-wrestling one another—no longer frustrated Hajime. Strangely enough, he felt a kind of pride. There was something refreshing in seeing everyone having fun together. No fate of the world bearing down on their heads, no hope, no despair—a simple night of fun. He made a mental note to thank Ibuki again. They really had needed this.

“SHIT!” The scream lingered the air for a second before being overshadowed by another splash. Hajime half-expected Mikan to have tumbled into the pool again, but when he looked, he saw Sonia in the water. Her once beautiful dress hung limply against her skin. Sputtering, she stood up. Behind her, Hajime saw Hiyoko snickering behind her hand. It seemed like she’d pushed Sonia into the water.

Come to think of it, Hiyoko had once mentioned to him that she hated Sonia even more than Mikan. He’d forgotten about it because of how rarely she said anything about it, but seeing her actions now brought the memory back in full force.

Unable to restrain her own snickering, Hiyoko burst out into full-on cackling. A second later, Sonia lunged out of the pool, grabbed her ankle, and, before anyone could do anything, dumped her into the pool. Hiyoko screeched as she clawed her way back to the surface. The expression on her face had frozen somewhere between incredulity and outrage. Now it was Hajime’s turn to conceal his laughter.

“S-S-Saionji-san!” Mikan rushed forward, wringing a towel in her hands. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Hiyoko pouted. She snatched the towel away as she climbed out of the pool. “I don’t need you to worry about me.”

Sonia had also made her way back onto dry land. Gundham abandoned his arm wrestling match. He stood next to her, trying to dry her off, but Sonia kept laughing. “That was amazing!” She exclaimed. “I have never been pushed into a pool before. Thank you, Hiyoko!” If Hiyoko’s intention had been to upset Sonia—a possibility Hajime could not discount—then her response was golden. Sonia’s way of taking delight in having new experiences with her classmates was an endearing quality. He was glad being Ultimate Despair hadn’t destroyed that side of her.

“The water is fine, everyone,” Sonia remarked.

“Of course,” Gundham purred. “My Dark Lady’s courage is unmatched. She has singlehandedly ventured into the deep and returned intact. Her technique is so advanced that my Dark Devas of
Destruction were not necessary.”

“Most certainly!” Sonia flexed.

“Gundham,” Peko said, “may I…. She wound one hand through her hair. “May I see your Dark Devas?”

“Beware, mortal. Only the chosen may gaze upon my subordinates.” Peko said nothing, instead standing there silently. After a moment, Gundham carefully unwound his scarf. It didn’t pair well with his tuxedo anyway. Cupping his hands, he held up the Four Dark Devas of Destruction. Peko froze for several seconds before hesitantly lifting her hand. The hamsters—thankfully Gundham couldn’t read his mind to hear him call them that—chittered but didn’t move. Peko stroked one with her finger. Unable to keep a smile off his face, Hajime hid it behind his hand.

“It’s soft,” Peko murmured, almost as if the discovery surprised her. “And cute.”

“Soft and cute?” Gundham flicked back his hair. “Thank you.”

“They are adorable,” Sonia agreed. “They remind me of a Skong or Makango. Only we do not need to consume them.”

“Consume?” Gundham roared.

“Indeed, it is a malicious practice,” Sonia stated.

Peko paid neither one any attention. Her interest was glued to the hamsters. She petted one again and, when it still didn’t retreat, a small smile crossed her face. “It didn’t run.”

The atmosphere was disrupted by yet another shout. Did someone really fall into the pool again? Hajime turned to look. Fortunately, no, no one else had fallen in. Unfortunately, the shout had been Ibuki’s. She stood on the stairs leading to the lobby with a microphone placed before her and an electric guitar in her hands.

“HELLO, EVERYONE!” Ibuki said. “Thanks for coming out here tonight. My name’s Ibuki Mioda, and I love curry! Curry’s a lot like music, you know. It’s delicious and takes a lot of effort to mess up. Now I present to you: The Story of All Loves!”

Before anyone could protest, Ibuki began, and the song wasn’t as bad as Hajime had feared.

It was worse.

……………….

Listening to the noises ringing around outside, Nagito sighed. Loud sounds had never sat well with him. He could tolerate them in short bursts, but tonight seemed like it would be different. Everyone had expressed great interest in having a party. He didn’t want to ruin their enthusiasm, and someone like him showing up would certainly dampen the mood. Even Hinata’s effort to convince him otherwise had been superficial—a light protest stemming from his own kindness. They both knew the truth was harsher than that.

It didn’t bother him, of course. But because it didn’t bother him, it couldn’t constitute any form of luck. That didn’t mean it was unrelated, of course. It served to further reinforce the status quo of dynamic change. It preluded the next step, as everything did.

His book was a little too simplistic to hold his interest. He set it down on Hinata’s shelf. The other
could burn it if he liked. Otherwise, Nagito would return it to the library later. Without anything to read though, he would have to depend on the company of his own mind. That troubled him. Thinking about the past, pointless as it was, wasn’t something he felt comfortable doing. Thinking about Hinata would be even worse.

To escape his own head, Nagito slipped into his coat and departed the cottage. The gun he’d taken from the mainland weighed heavily in his pocket. He patted it, as though the gesture would magically make it lighter. Mioda’s music filled his ears. Like Hinata, she’d told him to stop referring to her with an honorific back on the ship. He didn’t understand why his respect offended the Ultimates, but if that was what they wanted, he couldn’t well refuse. He wondered if he could consider her song to be ultimate proof of the distance between himself and an Ultimate. After all, what she did sounded more like the groaning metal of the plane he’d been on than it did music. But she was the Ultimate Musician, so of course, it made sense that he couldn’t understand her genius. He supposed she had a nice enough voice. He couldn’t see the song inspiring hope in anyone, but not everyone did things for hope.

“Hm?” Peko stood near the boardwalk, glancing toward the other cottages. “Peko? What are you doing here?”

“Komaeda?” She masked her surprise quickly, but not quickly enough to prevent him from seeing it. “The sound of Ibuki’s music frightened Gundham’s hamsters. I admit, they were cute things. It brought back some nice memories.” She adjusted her glasses with one hand. “Kuzuryu is not at the party. I thought I would ask him if he wanted anything.”

Kuzuryu-kun wasn’t attending? Interesting. “Do you know why not?” That course of action aligned much better with the old Kuzuryu-kun. His absence now felt too similar to the party Nagito had more or less manipulated Twogami-kun into throwing.

Peko fiddled with her glasses again. “He has been having difficulties lately.”

“Difficulties?”

“Nightmares of the things we did as Ultimate Despair.” Ah. A silly sentiment. Didn’t they know hope would always triumph over despair? It didn’t matter what atrocities were committed in despair’s name—in the end, hope emerged victorious. That was simply the way of the world. Nagito saw little use in getting upset over that process. Even if the pure hope he’d spent his life seeking really existed (and of course it did. Why had he framed that as a hypothetical?), how could it ever be recognized as such without first overcoming despair?

Nagito saw an opportunity. “Peko, would you let me talk to Kuzuryu-kun?”

She stared at him. One hand unconsciously moved toward the sword on her back. “Why?”

To become a stepping stone for his hope, of course. “I think I can help him.” He kept his excitement out of his tone. Someone like him had another chance to be useful to an Ultimate. All he needed to do was convince Peko to let him go inside. Her hand did not budge an inch. “I promise not to lay a finger on him. Just give me five minutes.”

“Komaeda, I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Huh? Why not? You don’t think it would be better for him to continue suffering like this?”

“Well, no.”

“See? You’re compassionate, Peko. You know Kuzuryu-kun better than anyone. But sometimes
that closeness blinds people to the problem at hand. That’s where an outsider can do some good. Don’t you think so?”

Peko glanced at Kuzuryu-kun’s cottage. “Three minutes. And I’ll be listening the whole time.”

He dipped his head. “That’s such a wise idea. As expected from an Ultimate like yourself, you truly know—”

“Two minutes, fifty-five seconds.”

Nagito opened the door without knocking. He stepped inside quickly and discretely locked it behind him. With any luck, Peko wouldn’t hear the click over the sound of Mioda’s singing. He’d already been lucky enough that she hadn’t searched his coat and found the gun. The room looked bare. It almost matched Hinata’s, except that Kuzuryu-kun had a small coffee table out with two cups on it.

Kuzuryu-kun leapt off the bed at his entrance. “Get the fuck out. Right now.”

“Hello, Kuzuryu-kun.” Nagito waved. “It seems neither of us are feeling very social tonight.”

“Out. Right fucking now. I’m not screwing around, Komaeda.”

“I would never accuse you of such a thing.” Nagito took another step into the room. “You’re a Symbol of Hope, Kuzuryu-kun. Shutting yourself up like this. I think it’s unbecoming.”

“I’ve never given a shit what you think. Get out. I’ll call Peko.”

“Ah. That would be disappointing. Did your sister always rely on Peko too?”

Either Mioda had stopped singing, or some other power had imposed a strict silence on the room. “What the fuck did you say?”

“I suppose she would have had to though, wouldn’t she? A talentless Reserve Course student like her—”

The punch came much faster than he’d expected. He’d just turned his head to move into a better position when suddenly he was on the ground. If he hadn’t moved at all, he’d have gotten a broken nose. Instead his jaw and cheek pounded. He opened and closed his mouth a few times. It seemed to be working fine. No blood this time either. Was the punch weaker this time? Or was that his luck again?


“So quick to resort to violence.” Nagito dusted off his jacket. “Is that your hope? Not that my opinion means anything, but that seems a bit brash. I think you could do better. So much better.”

“Shut up!” The next blow was a kick. Nagito felt it sink into his stomach. For a second, he wondered if he’d been impaled again. Then his head cracked against the cottage’s wooden floor, and the room spun around him. He coughed. Using his mechanical arm, he forced his body back into a sitting position.

“Ah, Kuzuryu-kun, if you want to kill me, there are better ways to—”

More pain, followed by a whirring snap. That didn’t feel like a broken bone though. His back was
pressed against the floor. It felt like someone was on top of him. Ah, there was. Kuzuryu-kun had pinned him to the ground and wrapped both hands around his neck. Nagito had promised not to touch the other Ultimate, so he couldn’t use his hands to try and pry himself free. Even without that promise, he wouldn’t have done so anyway. Someone like him didn’t have that right. He didn’t have a whole lot of air left.

If he died here, what would that mean? Kuzuryu-kun wasn’t doing this in the name of hope. Quite the opposite. This came from anger. Anger, Nagito knew, could be a form of hope or despair, depending on the person. Komaru Naegi’s anger would have created a brilliant hope. But at the same time, the thing about anger was that it worked a lot like despair. In order to eradicate it, you had to draw it out and let it grow to its fullest before completely annihilating it. Without that step, it would fester beneath the surface, boiling and boiling until it exploded. Kuzuryu-kun seemed to have nearly reached that point.

“Don’t you think,” Nagito choked out, “that we’ve done enough?”

The hands around his neck slackened. The darkness receded. “What did you say?” The voice sounded far away, but his brain told him that it wasn’t.

“You run from the past,” Nagito said. He couldn’t move his prosthetic limb. Perhaps it had broken in the fight. The Ultimate Mechanic would be mad that he’d broken his gift. “But hope only springs when you confront fear. Otherwise, Kuzuryu-kun, you’re never going to get anywhere.”

“Well listen to you,” the Ultimate Yakuza scorned. “You’ve got a lot of shit to answer for yourself, you know.”

“I think you’re strong enough to face it,” Nagito said. “That’s why it’s especially disappointing that you’re running instead.”

“Eh?” The world came back into focus. Kuzuryu-kun was glaring down at him with his one good eye. He was not currently wearing his eyepatch, and a jagged scar lay etched across his skin. “I’m not running. Decent people actually feel guilt for doing evil shit.”

“Hmm. I wonder if decent people do evil in the first place.”

“Shut up.” He clenched his fist as if to punch him again. “You’re the last person who gets to say that. What are you even doing here?”

“What good does it do to feel guilty?” Since the other still hadn’t gotten off of him, Nagito couldn’t get up. “Does that change anything? Does it create hope? It can, but only once you overcome that feeling. You’ve done it before, Kuzuryu-kun. I know you can do it again. You can! I believe in you!”

“You’re a goddamn psycho.”

The door burst open. Peko stood there, either unaware or disinterested in the fact that she’d broken the lock. “Young master!” She rushed over to them. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he said. Panting, he stood up. The two of them really did make a wonderful pair. The height difference was a bit strange, but that could easily be overlooked. With a final, withering glare, Kuzuryu-kun stomped out of the cottage.

Peko hesitated. “What did you do?”

Nagito smiled. “I think you’ll find he’s less angry with himself now.”
She glanced after him and then back down at Nagito. Realization dawned in her eyes. “I don’t believe it.”

“No?” That was disappointing. “I’m not lying to you, though if you want to think I am, that’s—”

“That’s not what I meant.” She waved his statement aside. “You don’t understand people at all.”

“It’s only natural that someone like me couldn’t understand the feelings of people like you and Kuzuryu-kun. It doesn’t matter if he hates me. But if hates himself—well, that’s different.” Hating greatness made no sense. That would be better directed at someone like Enoshima or even someone worthless like him. Since his own life didn’t matter, it stood to reason that neither did anything connected with him.

Running footsteps approached from outside, and Hinata hurried into the room. His gaze widened. “What’s going on? Fuyuhiko just stormed out of here. I’ll go talk to him, but—”

“Let me do it,” Peko interrupted. Her red eyes skewered Nagito for a moment, as if trying to read a deeper meaning into his actions. He gave her a friendly smile. She turned back to Hinata. “I can handle this.”

He nodded, and she pushed past him and exited the cottage. Which meant that they were alone together. Nagito took a deep breath to ease the sudden spike in his heartrate. Being lectured by Hinata wasn’t so bad. He couldn’t say that of course. Then the other would start to hate him—or would hate him even more.

But…hadn’t he just thought that it didn’t matter if he was hated?

Ah…why did Hinata make everything so complicated?

………………

It was Nagito because of course it was Nagito. It was always Nagito. Hajime didn’t even know why he was surprised anymore. Looking at the other now, he didn’t know whether to glare or shake his head in pity. With his unkempt hair, growing bruises, and broken, mechanical arm, pitying him would have been easy. At the same time, he withheld that emotion. Not out of any sense of bitterness, but because he knew Nagito would disapprove.

“Nagito.” He approached the still-sitting boy. “What are you doing?” It was almost funny how many times he’d wanted to ask that. It wasn’t funny how many times Nagito refused to answer.

“I was serving as a step—”

“A stepping stone for Fuyuhiko’s hope. Yeah, yeah.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. Nothing anyone had said about that seemed to make it through that thick skull. Granted, they’d mostly tried shunning or criticizing him, but…no, but nothing. That hadn’t worked before. It was the easy thing to do. And for better or worse, all of them were doing taking the easy way out. “Look, Nagito.” Even thinking this left a strange taste in his mouth. Not necessarily bad…but definitely strange. But he was tired of talking around issues and assuming that the other person understood. “Nagito, I don’t like it when you say things like that.”

“Ahhh.” Nagito glanced down. “I’m sorry for bothering you.”

“It’s not—that.” He took a deep breath. “It hurts me to hear you talk about yourself like that.”

“Eh?” Even with Nagito’s head down, Hajime caught the way his eyes widened.
“That attitude is dangerous. It could get you killed.” He barely managed to stop himself from saying ‘again.’

Nagito cocked his head. “So?”

Just that one word infuriated Hajime. He drew in air with a sharp hiss. “So? So? Seriously? Why is this so hard for you to understand?” A small part of him wondered why he was the one having such a hard time understanding, but he brushed that aside.

Nagito nodded. “I see. You think I was insulting your friends. But I assure you, I didn’t mean to do that. I simply meant that my death would be inconsequential, and all the Ultimates are smart and talented enough to see it as such. After all, there’s no reason for them to be concerned about trash —”

“I told you already. You aren’t trash.”

“Ah. Hinata-kun is so kind to me.”

Great. The honorific was back. Clearly he wasn’t doing this right. Hanging out with Nagito this much would probably give him an aneurysm. Sighing, Hajime switched approaches. “Are you okay?” He had taken quite a beating. Hajime made a mental note to talk to Fuyuhiko about that too. He understood that urge, but this kind of treatment was unacceptable.

Nagito sighed. “I broke Souda-kun’s present.”

Hajime waited, but no self-deprecating speech followed that statement. He sighed. Again. “Let me see.” Nagito’s eyes widened when Hajime knelt next to him. Hajime sat on his heels and lifted the artificial limb. It was funny. Before any of this, he would have had no idea what to do. Now the fix looked relatively simple. Thanks, Izuru. “Nagito, do you, by any chance, still have that multi-tool you had in the simulation?”

“Hm? What? Not talented enough to fix it yourself?”

“Wha—?”

“It was a joke.” He glanced at Nagito’s face just in time to see a nervous expression melt back into his usual smile. “I do.” Reaching into his coat with his good hand, Nagito offered him the multi-tool.

Hajime took it. Laying the metal arm in his lap, he began repairing it. “Do I want to know how you got this past the Future Foundation?”

“Got lucky, I guess,” Nagito smiled.

Hajime raised his eyebrows. “Was that a joke too?”

Nagito hummed, low and deep in his throat. “Maybe.”

The arm really was fairly rudimentary. Then again, that wasn’t Kazuichi’s fault. They’d done the best with the supplies they had. He made another mental note, this time to ask Naegi if he could include better materials in a future shipment. He liked the color scheme though. Opening a panel near the wrist, he adjusted it so it could move properly. Nagito watched his hands. Strangely, Hajime didn’t mind. The silence was kind of comfortable actually.

“Hinata?” Nagito’s coiled whisper crept toward him hesitantly, as if afraid of his reaction. Hajime
selected the mini-screwdriver on the multi-tool and hummed in permission. Nagito curled his fingers around his pants. “Never mind.”

Hajime tightened one of the bolts in the arm. “What is it?”

Nagito sighed. When he spoke, his words came out falteringly, like a child taking its first steps. “Why are you helping me?”

“This again?” Hajime rolled his eyes. “I told you already. I just want to.”

Nagito shook his head. “Mhm. I mean…aren’t you mad at me?” His eyes flashed up to meet Hajime’s. He was as perceptive as always. Sometimes Nagito noticed the littlest things; other times, they soared over his head. But then, Hajime supposed he was like that too. He put down the multi-tool.

“Yes,” he said.

“Nanami-san,” Nagito said simply. “I miss her too. Even if it’s pointless, I—”

“It’s not pointless!” Hajime nearly smacked him. He took a deep breath to calm himself down. “She sacrificed herself to save all of us. That’s something we have to carry forever. But it’s not a burden. It’s not pointless! The memory of her…of someone like her…that’s something you cherish. Don’t you dare tell me it’s pointless.”

“I could have saved her.” Nagito’s good hand retreated into his coat pocket. Hajime was about to open his mouth to remind him that saving her would have killed everyone else when Nagito continued. “If I’d just shot Enoshima back then, Nanami-san would still be alive.”

“N-Nagito?” This was one of the last things Hajime had expected to hear.

Nagito looked up at him, and his eyes seemed to shimmer. “I thought Enoshima had to survive to become a stepping stone for Ultimate Hope. But…but if I’d killed her and helped save everyone…that would have been real hope, too, right? Right, Hinata?” The sheer desperation and raw emotion in his voice stunned Hajime. Whenever he’d rambled about hope before, he’d always sounded insane, obsessive, but this was something else. It was the sound of someone realizing their regrets all at once.

Slowly, Hajime wrapped an arm around Nagito’s waist and pulled the other boy into a hug.

“H-H-Hinata?” The surprised gasp sounded like a breathy rasp in his ear. “What are you doing?”

“You really did care about her, didn’t you?” Hajime could barely control his own voice now. All the malice and ill will he’d prescribed to the other boy dissipated into nothingness. He felt Nagito nod against his shoulder, and he tightened his grip. “I miss her too.”

Nagito pulled back to look at him. “Hinata, I—”

“YAHOOO!” The sudden shout nearly gave Hajime a heart attack. Ibuki stood in the doorway, dragging Kazuichi along behind her. “There you are, Nagito-chan! Ibuki’s been looking for you.”

“Eh?” Nagito’s mouth dropped open. “Me?”

“Hmmm…yup!” Ibuki nodded happily. “You’re coming to Ibuki-chan’s party right now! And since you were late, I’m making you sing the next song!”
Hajime watched this tempest unfold with a sense of helplessness. Kazuichi shot him a pleading glance. “Save me,” he whispered.

Ibuki laughed. “Nuh-uh! Kazuichi-chan found a cute sea turtle on the beach!”

“Why does that mean I have to go with you?”

“Come on, Nagito-chan!” Ibuki ran forward and grabbed his hand. Nagito looked at Hajime, but before either of them could do anything, Ibuki had dragged him and Kazuichi out of Fuyuhiko’s cottage. Chuckling softly to himself, Hajime followed them back outside. For once, his spirits felt higher after conversing with Nagito. That alone was a rare occurrence. He followed them back to the pool.

Most of the others were exactly where he remembered them being. Akane had planted herself near one of the tables and was eating what could well be her eight plate of food. She waved a chicken leg at their approach. Teruteru stood next to her, beaming at how much food she was consuming. Mahiru had dragged Mitarai, Mikan, Hiyoko, and Nekomaru into a card game near the Old Building. Sonia and Gundham were on the opposite side of the pool talking to Twogami. Aside from Fuyuhiko and Peko, then, everyone seemed to be having a good time.

“OKAY!” Ibuki shouted. Somehow it sounded amplified even though she wasn’t near a microphone. “Everyone listen up! It’s time to get suuuuuuper stoked! Hella stoked! Nagito-chan is going to sing for you.”

“I…I don’t think…. ” Nagito was blushing and looking around wildly, possibly wondering if his luck cycle would save him from this.

“Ehhh? Komaeda’s going to sing?” Hiyoko started cackling. “Hooray!”

“Sing from the bottom of your stomach!” Nekomaru instructed. “Make it big and loud!”

“Is it the arcane choir?” Gundham thrust his hands toward the hotel. “What foul beast will you summon?”

“I should like to hear it,” Sonia clapped.

“I’m not singing,” Kazuichi said, trying to pull his arm free. “You can’t make me.”

Ibuki giggled. “You don’t have to sing, Kazuichi-chan! Just Nagito-chan! Ibuki has something else planned for you.”

“That sounds even worse!”

“Erm.” Nagito shuffled awkwardly in place. The wind reached into his coat and blew it out behind him. His white hair waved like rice in a field. The moonlight shining down on him made him look almost…beautiful. He stood before the microphone, gazing out at all the other Ultimates. His eyes met Hajime’s, and Hajime nodded.

“Ohkay….” Nagito said. Grabbing his metal hand with his good one, he began singing.

“I saw you walking through the school building at night. 
Standing there, my heart is racing. I’m basking in your light. 
In just one look, and just one moment, and I knew
that I was put on this world just for the sake of meeting you.”
His gaze had not left Hajime this whole time. He sang somewhat softly, low and throaty, in a way that completely disregarded Nekomaru’s advice. But it still sounded…nice. Better than nice, even. Nagito could actually sing rather well. That was another talent Hajime didn’t have—or maybe he did now.

Hajime turned away. He needed to go find Fuyuhiko and Peko, and listening to Nagito sing was…he didn’t know. Not unpleasant, definitely, but there was something there, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. A mysterious bond. That was what he’d called it once. He decided to call it that again.

“Breathing in your air, breaking through despair
And lifting up this feeling we will share! I miss you!
Now is the time for absolute hope’s birthday!”

Hajime let his feet guide him past the cottages and down toward the beach. The moon and stars illuminated his path, almost as if they wanted to nudge him in the right direction. The sand sank softly under his shoes. He could even see their footprints against its surface, leading him onwards. Nagito’s singing and the lull of the ocean waves nestled next to him. He closed his eyes for a moment just to take it all in. Ibuki had been right. This really was a nice celebration. Everyone was coming together. Finding happiness. All he had to do to complete it now was get Fuyuhiko and Peko to do the same.

He saw them sitting together on the beach. The moonlight gave their outlines a fuzzy indistinctness. But it did nothing to obscure the sight of Peko, one hand on Fuyuhiko’s arm and the other resting against his cheek, leaning in to give him a kiss. Fuyuhiko leaned into it, kissing back, and then he lunged forward, knocking both of them to the ground. They rolled over, embrace unbroken.

Hajime smiled and turned back toward Hotel Mirai. He’d never thought about it before, but now…that name seemed perfect for it. Whatever else their future had in store, they would always remember this night.

Deep in his heart, he knew Chiaki would have approved.

Number of Students: 16

Chapter End Notes

How writing this chapter went:
Me: I’ll write a nice, happy, fluffy party chapter!
Me: Okay…this feels weird, but maybe it’ll work.
Nagito: Oh hey there! Nice happy, fluffy party chapter you have there. Can I have a POV?
Me: Well, sure. I guess so.
Me: Nagito.
Me: Nagito stop. Why? I WANTED HAPPINESS.
Hajime: Don't worry, I got this.
Me: Thanks, Hajime.
Ibuki: YAHOO!
Me: Dammit, Ibuki. I hate it when characters interrupt others like that. It's one of the
worst tropes ever.
Ibuki: YAHOOOOOOOOOO!

Also, hahahahahahaha, screw the OVA. My story is canon now.

As always, thank you for reading. Seriously. 5,000 hits...I never expected anything like that. It's so amazing, and you guys are even more amazing, and just...thank you all so much!
Sorry. I never wanted to be that person who did a whole chapter just for a brief update. But it seemed like the best way to let you guys in on what's been happening.

No. I have not quit.
Yes. I plan to continue.

The biggest thing is that school has been absolutely kicking my ass since January. I absolutely need to have everything buckled down so I can graduate. The next week or two are still awful, but after that, with any luck, I'll have time to write again, and I'll get you all another chapter.

I'm so so so sorry for making you all wait so long. It hurts me too. It really does. But I'm determined to finish this story.

Lots of love, and thank you!
By the time Hajime returned to the poolside, the scene had changed somewhat.

“All right then!” Akane pounded her fist into her own palm. “Let’s get started.”

“Very well,” Twogami replied, smugly folding his arms over his chest – a position which looked incredibly bizarre given that he now had Mitarai’s likeness rather than Togami’s. “I cannot allow you to beat me here.”

Woah, woah! Were they fighting? Hajime stepped forward, but before he could do anything else, both of them began cramming food onto their plates and into their mouths. Chicken legs, potatoes, beans, sushi, udon, even something that looked like a white pudding – all of that and more vanished in an instant. Somehow, with these two involved, this felt more like a fight than an eating contest. Hajime let out a helpless chuckle and walked around to the other side of the pool. Just to be safe.

Mikan, Ibuki, Kazuichi, Sonia, Gundham, Mahiru, Hiyoko, Nekomaru, Mitarai, Nagito, and Teruteru were all playing a card game.

“Ah, Hajime,” Sonia said, smiling. “You are just in time. Join us.”

“Huh?” He peered at the pile of cards in the center. “What are you playing?”

“UNO!” Hiyoko cackled, tossing her own cards into the air. Mahiru made a face halfway between a laugh and an apologetic grimace. Mitarai let out a short, high-pitched giggling before burying his mouth with his hands. Hajime did his best not to stare at him. That was too cute.

He sat down next between Kazuichi and Gundham. "I didn't even know we had Uno cards," he remarked. Evidently his words attracted Gundham's ire, because the Ultimate Breeder began laughing.

"Foolish mortal. These charms were a gift from an angel, meant to imbue us with good fortune."

"Oh?" Teruteru leaned in, resting his chin on his hand and waggling his eyebrows in a way that made Hajime feel vaguely nauseous. "Naegi is an angel now?"

Gundham's cheeks pinkened, but Sonia leapt to his defense. "You were fooled by his mortal form, Teruteru! You do not possess the All-Seeing Eye!" She put a hand on Gundham's shoulder. "That is why we could see the truth!"

"You speak well," Gundham mused, nodding in agreement. "Truly a good line."

"Hey," Hiyoko said, a steel edge growing in her voice, "what are we waiting for? Let's start already." As if she hadn't been the one to throw her cards in the air and delay everyone.

Mahiru dealt the cards, and for the first time, Hajime noticed how large the deck was. Either it was a jumbo pack or else they'd smashed a few decks together. Which...yeah, that made sense, considering how many people were playing. He took the cards Mahiru passed him and glanced at them. An utterly average hand. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Kazuichi trying to peek, and
he pulled his cards closer to his chest.

"Did I get everyone?" Mahiru asked, arching her back. Her camera swung limply against her chest.

"CHAAAA!" Ibuki shouted. "Ibuki-chan has a draw four! She's definitely going to win!"

Kazuichi tugged on the collar of his jumpsuit. "We should go counterclockwise," he said.

Mahiru glared. "Clockwise."

Kazuichi actually seemed to deflate. The poor guy, Hajime thought. But Kazuichi was resilient. He'd be fine. Probably. Plus there were plenty of reverse cards, so he could still be alright.

Mahiru flipped over the top card. A yellow six. She smiled at Mitarai. "Start us off."

"Oh...um..." Mitarai pored over his cards. "Okay." He placed a yellow three down hesitantly, as if afraid of somehow breaking the card. His hesitance reminded Hajime of Mikan.

Sonia smiled encouragingly and added a yellow skip. Gundham let out a low, throaty chuckle. "I shall conserve my abilities for now then. Indeed, if I were to unleash my true powers, this entire island could disappear."

That brought the game to Hajime. Huh. Looking at all his cards, he could...yeah. He put in a yellow eight. Kazuichi looked notably relieved as he quietly added a yellow nine.

"Hmm." Ibuki tapped her cards against the side of her head. "Kyah! Draw!" She threw the draw four down.

"WAAAAAH!" Mikan dropped all her cards. "I'm sorry!"

"Hey, Mikan, you have a draw four too!" Kazuichi pointed at it. "You can put it down and make Komaeda draw eight!"

"Wait, are we stacking?" Mahiru looked confused. "That's not how I played."

Nekomaru released a boisterous laugh. "Stacking is the best way to grow stronger!"

Mahiru made a face. "What? It's a card game."

"Card games are serious business." Hiyoko's expression darkened. "They're a perfect chance to crush your enemies." Hajime really didn't like the look on her face when she said that. For a brief second, the thought that she might actually still be despair flashed through his mind. But then he remembered that she'd always been like this.

"Um," Sonia glanced around. "I have not been able to experience this game before. So I would like to see how it is done. Mahiru has kindly explained the rules, but she did not mention this stacking." Her eyes shone. "It sounds like fun!"

"Come on, big sis Mahiru!" Hiyoko put her hands on her hips and adopted a pouty expression not well suited to begging. "Please?"

Mahiru sighed. "Hajime?"

He looked up, surprised. "Ah...yeah, that's fine."

Nagito had gathered all of Mikan's cards and handed them back to her. "I'm s-so sorry!" She
wailed. And then immediately placed down the draw four.

Nagito looked at the deck sadly. "Just my luck." He leaned forward to draw cards from the deck, and as he did so, Hajime spotted another draw four in his hand. He narrowed his eyes. Nagito could have used that to pass twelve cards onto Nekomaru. What was he doing?

"Draw four cards change the color...so Mikan has to pick a new color as well," Teruteru chimed in, looking over at her. "I could show you a few if you want."

"Me? Choose?" Mikan looked frightened for a moment. "Well...r-red?"

"Red!" Nekomaru's cards looked almost comically small in his hand. His broad shoulders rose as he lifted a card into the air and added it to the pile. A red nine. "Red! The color of passion!" He chuckled. "A fine choice, Mikan."

"I agree." Teruteru chuckled as well. Only it sounded different somehow. Worse. He played a reverse.


"Mhm! Back to me!" Nekomaru threw down a six. Nagito added a three, Mikan a five, and the game continued in that manner for a while. It had already been dark when the party began, so Hajime wasn't really sure when he noticed that time had actually passed. The air had gotten a bit colder, and the stars overhead seemed to glisten like falling snow.

Hiyoko had fallen asleep, and Nekomaru and Mahiru had carried her back to her cottage. Mahiru hadn't returned after that, and while Nekomaru had, he'd immediately had to do the same for Akane, who had passed out after stuffing herself in her eating contest with Twogami. After helping Akane to her room, Nekomaru hadn't returned either.

"I must say, playing games like this is nice," Sonia murmured, breaking the friendly banter and mocking calls of distress whenever someone added more cards to their hand. Nagito had won the first two games easily. No matter how many cards he drew, he still seemed to run out first. On the third game now, Hajime found himself paying more attention to which cards he had. Despite Nagito's unbroken streak, though, he had to agree that Sonia had a point.

"You're right, Sonia!" Kazuichi cried out. "I agree. Yup! There's not much that could make this better."

"Perhaps if we were playing strip-Uno," Teruteru said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully and nodding in agreement with his own perverted thoughts. "Hmhmhm. Yes. I think that would make for a better experience."

Kazuichi looked interested. If Mahiru were here, she would have shut that suggestion down immediately. But out of the remaining players, Hajime realized that he was the only one likely to voice any strong objections.

"Strip poker?" Mitarai's eyes widened. "Oh no, no, no, that would be—no!"

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Teruteru pressed, leaning in toward Mitarai. With both Mahiru and Hiyoko gone, no one sat in-between them now. "Surely you've seen it plenty of times with your waifus. You can imagine it, can't you?" A faint trail of blood leaked out of his nose.

"Enough," came Twogami's stern voice. Hajime almost jumped. He'd forgotten the Ultimate Imposter was still present, sitting in a pool chair and watching the party. It was a little like his role
back at the party he’d organized in the simulation. But between that and the things he’d said in Hajime’s cottage earlier….

Hajime found that his gaze had drifted over to Nagito, and he glanced down at his own cards instead. Any interest he’d had in fending off strip Uno evaporated. He had a red draw two, a red eight, a yellow four, a yellow nine, and a green two. Not exactly a stellar hand.

“Fuhahaha! Tremble, mortals!” Gundham declared as he placed down a skip. “Do you feel the frost dull your senses?”

Now skipped, Hajime watched Kazuichi play a draw four.

“No fair!” Ibuki protested. “CHAAAA! Kazuichi-chan, how rude!”

“What?” He looked honestly taken aback. “Come on. I didn’t have any other cards to play!”

“Ibuki knows.” The eccentric light musician sighed and picked up a few cards from the deck. A grin popped onto her face. “But she’ll have her revenge for this. Just you wait.”

“Eh?” Kazuichi leaned sideways into Hajime, grabbing his left arm. “Hajime, save me!”

“Get off!” Hajime shook his arm free. The fewer things Kazuichi pulled him into, the better. The last time had seen them waiting for a good hour in an empty diner before…well, before the second murder. And the parade of girls in swimsuits, including Chiaki. He’d more or less put that behind him, but in this moment, he couldn’t help wondering how the Ultimate Gamer would do at a card game like this. She hadn’t talked about much besides video games, but he felt certain she would have been happy to just see everyone having fun.

“Some soul brother you are,” Kazuichi grumbled.

“U-um…” Mikan’s timid stutter finally reached the others. “Is it okay if I p-play now?” Suddenly she screwed her eyes shut. “Hnnn! I’m sorry for asking!”

“It is fine.” Sonia wore a loose smile. “Please, go ahead.” Mikan put down her card, then Nagito, then Teruteru, and then it was Mitarai’s turn again. Hajime noticed that he was staring at Mikan uncertainly. He might not have recognized it at all. Except…he did. Because he himself had felt that same kind of uncertainty toward Mikan. That was what she’d cried about in the pharmacy earlier. While he hadn’t been part of their class, Mitarai and Mikan must have had some interaction there. That was the only explanation Hajime could think of.

“Hajime, it’s your turn.” Kazuichi nudged him.

“Eh?” Hajime blinked. “Oh…” Sure enough, Mitarai had already played. And so had Sonia and Gundham. “Right. Sorry.”

“Perhaps he was too intimidated by my presence,” Gundham growled in a low voice.

“And who would not be? You are the Dark Overlord, Gundham Tanaka!” Sonia fawned. By way of answer, Gundham wrapped his scarf around his mouth.

Kazuichi scowled but didn’t say anything. It looked like there might have been a little progress on that front. That much was nice to see. Kazuichi’s infatuation had always struck Hajime as a bit juvenile. Shaking his head slightly to suppress a smile, Hajime played his yellow nine.

“Are you sure you don’t want to play?” Mitarai asked Twogami as Kazuichi played.
“I’m sure.” Twogami stood up; the lounge chair followed him for a second or two before collapsing back to the poolside. “I’m starting to feel a bit tired anyway.” He still bore such a striking resemblance to Togami that Hajime had half-expected a comment about how pedestrian card games were.

A chorus of goodnights flew through the air as Twogami lumbered off. A moment of silence expanded in his absence, broken only by the light lapping of the pool water and, further off, the steady pulse of the sea. The moonlight overhead drizzled down on all of them. They’d really done it. They’d saved the Future Foundation from disaster and made themselves enemies of the world in the process. He hadn’t quite worked out what good they could do while they were trapped here on Jabberwock Island, but surprisingly, he found he wasn’t worried. Unlike every other time he’d stared up at the night sky in the simulation, he felt almost relaxed. He knew they’d find something. Working together, the way Chiaki wanted, they definitely would.

“Uno,” Nagito said quietly, placing down a yellow three. Sure enough, he held only a single card.


“He has the devil’s luck,” Gundham observed.

“How can we stop him? Hmm.” Ibuki pressed her pointer fingers to her forehead. “Hmm.” She had a look of such intense concentration on her face that Hajime wanted to laugh.

“Well, we could try relying on our hopes,” Kazuichi shrugged.

There was an awkward silence.

“I-I have a draw two,” Mikan said. “It’s blue, so….”

“Ah, yes.” Teruteru pulled out a small comb and began straightening his hair. “Cheating is a fantastic way to win. Except in cooking. Not that one can do it there, but even if you could, don’t. It would be disgraceful.”

“Ch-cheating?” Mikan almost threw all her cards again. “I didn’t m-mean too! Forgive meeee!”

“Don’t worry, Mikan-chan.” Ibuki poked her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. “Blue I can do! Kyaah! That rhymed! Ibuki-chan is a poet and a musician!”

The plan seemed to be going smoothly. Everyone played normally until the game reached Ibuki. Beaming, she put in a wild. “Blue,” she declared, turning to Mikan. “Go, Mikan-chan! Go!” Kazuichi and a few others joined in the encouragement. Mitarai looked around at everyone. He parted his lips slightly before sealing them again. Hajime returned his gaze to the pile of cards just in time to see Nagito place another draw two on top of Mikan’s, winning the game. Again.

“No way!” Kazuichi gripped his beanie incredulously. “You can’t win on a stack!”

“Huh? I can’t?” Nagito looked surprised. “I don’t remember reading that in the rulebook.”

“Neither do I,” Sonia agreed.

“No, no,” Kazuichi shook his head adamantly. “I’m telling you, it’s against the rules!”

“Eh, what does it matter?” Teruteru threw his cards into the pile. “He’d win anyway.” The chef rose and began waddling over toward the table. “Y’all liked the food, right? There’s still so much left. Come on now. Leftovers ain’t so good, you know.”
“Oh, yes!” Sonia leapt to her feet. “I thought it was…” and here she scrunched up her face in concentration, “totes delish, Hanamura-san!”

Hajime had a flash of a memory that was and wasn’t his. Talking about memes. He winced internally and probably externally. There was despair and then there was plain cringe, and while they might have been one and the same to Enoshima, he was glad not to have to put up with that anymore. Not a slight against you, Izuru, he added hastily. No response. He rarely even sensed the other presence in his mind anymore.

Since the game was effectively over and because nobody else had volunteered to do it, Hajime helped Teruteru clean up the remaining food from the poolside, moving most of it into the hotel lobby or to some of the working fridges in the market. Surprisingly the chef kept his perverted comments to a minimum. Whether that was because food was involved or for some other reason, Hajime wasn’t sure, but either way, he was grateful for it.

In fact, Teruteru didn’t say much of anything at all until they were almost done. As Hajime searched for a spot in the freezer to store the remaining eel, he heard a faint cough. He raised his eyebrows slightly, but since he had his head and upper body in the freezer, that did nothing.

“Yeah?”

Some faint shuffling convinced Hajime to take a quick glance behind him, but Teruteru was just pushing his fingers together awkwardly. “Hajime…do you think it’s okay to trust Komaeda?”

Hajime hadn’t been expecting that ten million yen question. He was supposed to say yes, especially after everything they’d all been doing. Seeing Nagito’s actions tonight hadn’t changed that…had they? No, he was beginning to doubt himself again. That wouldn’t do. Nagito, after all, had been invaluable in helping save the Future Foundation and the world from tilting back toward despair. So what if his mind remained as mysterious as ever?

“I do,” he said, realizing that he hadn’t answered yet. “I mean. Twogami trusts you now, right?” It felt like a bit of a low blow to bring that up, but Hajime felt it was necessary in proving his point. “We can’t blame Komaeda any more than anyone else.”

“Mhm.” Teruteru set down a crumb-covered tray. A few bits of bread or possibly cake rolled around before coming to a halt. Teruteru pressed his finger down on one and brought it to his lips. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but in some ways, that simulation was easier. There was always a clear answer. You were good at finding that.”

There was a brief pause during which Hajime knew both he and Teruteru were remembering the gradual way Hajime had lasered in on the unfortunate chef during the trial. Then Teruteru continued.

“But when it comes to this, there aren’t any clear answers. Just a spectrum of right and wrong.” He lowered his hand back to his side, grabbing the edge of his apron. “That’s another reason I liked recipes, actually.”

“Speaking of trust,” Hajime said slowly, waiting for each thought to organize itself before speaking. “What about you, Teruteru? You’re still talking like…well, you know.”

“Hmm? Heheh. I guess you’re right.” Teruteru nudged the tray on the counter. “Helps it seem less real, I guess. I mean, I can’t open a diner now, let alone a world-class restaurant.” A sad smile tugged on his lips. “Like I said, not knowing had its benefits.”

Hajime said nothing. Frankly, he wasn’t sure what to say because he didn’t know whether or not he
agreed with that sentiment. There was a point where he would have wholeheartedly agreed, but there also points where he wouldn’t. Accepting ignorance in those trials would have meant death. Not for the first time, he recalled the way he’d felt during Nagito’s trial especially. He’d called it malice then…a mind-boggling malice. Now he knew a little better, but still…there had to be a better way to do that.

Teruteru adjusted the small chef’s hat on his head. “Goodnight, Hajime.”

“Oh.” Hajime blinked, looking up—or down, rather, at the chef. “Goodnight.”

Following Teruteru back out of the lobby, he found himself facing the poolside. Despite the fact that most of them were barely adults…easily university-age, there weren’t any indications left that there had been a party at all. No mess, no destruction. Not that he’d been to many parties, but still…that was how he’d imagined them, anyway. As Teruteru’s footsteps died away, Hajime found himself reliving that sense of loneliness. The same one he’d just rejected a few minutes ago. A fierce desire to laugh gripped him, matched only by an equally strong urge to cry. His throat felt sealed. He didn’t understand why he felt this way.

Izuru? He ventured.

No response.

Hajime hurried down the steps and toward his cottage. He tried his best not to run and was fairly certain he succeeded. It wasn’t until he was back in his cottage, though, that he found he could breathe easily again.

Fortunately, his cottage was empty. He’d half-expected Nagito to be waiting there, but fortunately, the pale boy was off doing something else. Or…perhaps not so fortunate? In less than an hour, Nagito had gone from fighting with Fuyuhiko to singing on the hotel steps and playing cards with everyone. Fuyuhiko himself hadn’t come to the party, admittedly…some things didn’t change. At least, not quickly.

For a second, he relived seeing Peko and Fuyuhiko down on the beach together.

Hajime shook his head. Good for them. Especially after all they’d been through, and that terrible trial with Mahiru. That’s right, Mahiru! She’d been willing to set aside her animosity toward Fuyuhiko…or at the very least, to cooperate with him. And that was before most of the others had woken up. Not for the first time, he found himself admiring that strength. How had Nagito described her? Spirited, right? He made a mental note to talk to her about repairing relationships. If she and Fuyuhiko had made some progress, surely it wouldn’t be impossible for Nagito to do the same. It wasn’t like he’d expected everything to be as easy as Gundham and Nekomaru’s or Ibuki and Mikan’s. In fact, he supposed he should be lucky that those had gone over as smoothly as they had. But he felt he was running out of ways to say ‘we all need to try harder’ or ‘we are all guilty.’ It was easy to say that they all needed to forgive and trust one another again, to work toward a common goal. Doing that was another story.

Still, tonight had been a good step in that direction. Partying with everyone…nothing at stake. No Monokuma to pop out with a rocket launcher. A nice night of relaxation. Yeah. It was a good step.

Tugging limply on his tie, Hajime made his way into the bathroom, where he stripped and entered the shower. An unconscious sigh escaped him as the hot water trickled down his body, loosening his muscles, cleansing his anxiety. For all the times he’d idolized being confident, becoming confident, he hadn’t realized until recently just how difficult it was to stay confident. He’d been so focused on getting there that hanging on never occurred to him. Thinking about that now, in the
hot water, he couldn’t help but shiver a little. It sounded dangerously close to what Enoshima had said about people clinging to hope.

But things were different now. Hope won.

Did Nagito think so?

Even with all of the times and things everything Hajime had wondered about Nagito, that was something completely different. Especially when he realized what a broad field that question covered. Did Nagito think hope won when they saved the Future Foundation? Or when everyone survived his trial—when they weeded out the traitor? He’d said as much, hadn’t he? Thinking back on it now, Hajime couldn’t quite remember. But even if he had, had he meant it? And if he asked Nagito, would the other tell him? Would his answers be honest? He felt like Nagito would simply sneer at him. Express disappointment in his ability to reach the truth.

Dwelling on this was rapidly sinking his mood again. Giving his head another shake, Hajime focused on his shower. Even all of the water pouring down proved insufficient to keep his ahoge down, but he was used to his hair never lying flat. He made a halfhearted attempt to push it back down before sighing and giving up.

He felt like a lot of time had passed when he finally turned off the water and toweled himself dry. Slipping into his night clothes, he climbed into bed and looked up at the dark ceiling. He thought he’d be more tired after everything that had happened, but his eyes kept refusing to stay closed. Even when he did manage to doze off, he kept snapping to again a few moments later.

Better than those bizarre dreams featuring Monokuma rambling about nonsense, he figured.

He rolled over onto his side and forced himself to close his eyes and breathe deeply. Just as he thought he might finally slip off to sleep, a quiet knock at the door drew his attention. He contemplated ignoring it. The knock came again. Grumbling, he got up and crossed over to the door, pulling it open.

“What?” He demanded.

Gundham stood there. The ends of his scarf drifted lazily in the wind. One of his hamsters chittered on his shoulders. Its black eyes stared unwaveringly at Hajime. He resolved to stare at Gundham instead.

The Ultimate Breeder crossed his arms over his chest. He appeared to be deeply satisfied with himself. “The bells of catastrophe seldom wait for morning. Indeed, it is often the essence of night which draws them out.”

“What is it?” Hajime said shortly, not bothering to mask his irritation.

“My loyal subordinate, Mirage Golden Hawk Jum-P, has yet to return from his reconnaissance,” Gundham said. “The Dark Lady counseled that I seek him in the mortal realm.”

“I haven’t seen him,” Hajime responded.

Gundham nodded sagely. “Well of course not. He, like the others, has been trained in the very recesses of hell. Your level is far too low to glimpse him.”

“Goodnight, Gundham,” Hajime said, a note of warning creeping into his tone. He closed the door with a strong (but hopefully not too strong) thud and sank back into his bed. He may not have been particularly tired, but he hadn’t seen the hamster, and he had little desire to crawl around the island this late looking for it. Gundham would probably find it anyway, just like he had with his earring.
He heard Gundham moving down to the next cottage to ask that resident and stifled a sigh. He had enough to worry about without a hamster going missing.

Try as he might, he couldn’t disconnect that thought from Nagito Komaeda. There was little doubt that the luckster still took up most of his worry. Although he doubted Nagito had anything to do with the hamster disappearing. The phone, sure.

Come to think of it, what had happened to the phone? He hadn’t seen it in its usual place in the lobby during the party earlier. Had they agreed to move it elsewhere after that incident? He couldn’t quite remember. Kazuichi had managed to restore electricity to most of the island, so it was definitely possible. Eh…whatever. He could find it in the morning.

He turned onto his side again and closed his eyes. And shortly thereafter, he knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

I like how right after I updated last time, Killer Killer returned from a hiatus to ruin my plans for canon-compliancy. Again. Haaaaaah. Great. Thanks, Danganronpa.

V3...SDR2 remains the best game. That is all.

Sorry this took so long, guys. Thanks for sticking around. It definitely won't take that long for the next chapter.
The room spun. Or at least it felt that way – round and round, like bullets loaded in a revolver. Everyone stood before a simple podium. The walls were a splayed-out, cracking yellow. At least, he thought they were yellow. The decades of added-on plaster and dust made it difficult to be sure.

And then came the voices. His fellow, former classmates all spoke in unison, but their words couldn’t be more different. Accusations flew around without aim, without rhyme, without reason. All of them shouting nonsense or getting tangled up in pointless detours. Hajime’s head began throbbing.

“Hey!” He yelled. “Hey, cut it out!”

But his voice disappeared into the whirlwind of other shouts. Nobody heard, or if they did, nobody listened.

“Everyone calm down!” He tried again.

But it was useless. If anything, people only became more hysterical. Kazuichi had pulled his beanie down over his eyes. Mikan let out choked little sobs, and Akane was threatening to beat up any and everyone who disagreed with her. Hiyoko alternated between snickering when someone else was being accused and loudly bawling when she herself became the target.

But over it all, even over the raucous cries of Ibuki, Hajime heard it. A sound—a laugh. Perhaps the only sound capable of piercing through the chaotic maelstrom of the trial room. It came from a slightly raised chair, atop a plush red cushion.

A black-and-white bear rested its front paws beneath its chin and laughed again.

Hajime sat bolt upright. His sheets were a tangled ball in his hands. A corner of the mattress pad had come off, as had the entire comforter (despite being a tropical island, it actually got rather cold at night). Tearing his gaze around the room, scouring every corner, he found no sign of Monokuma. The evil bear wasn’t here…that’s right. They’d beaten Enoshima already. It was just a nightmare. Another one, admittedly, but still. He wasn’t sure if having one from the simulation was better or worse, considering the few he’d had about things he’d done as Izuru.

No offense, he added.

Nothing.

Hajime swung his legs over the bed. The wooden floor felt cold under his feet. Casting a quick glance toward the window, he saw it was still mostly dark. Only a faint pinkish tinge hung in the sky, draped low. Yawning, he contemplated trying to return to bed for a few seconds before deciding against it. He got dressed quickly and left the cottage, heading toward the beach.

The Haima was still docked where they’d left it. Hajime made his way up the gangplank and onto the deck of the ship. They’d been so busy partying, even on the boat (Teruteru made a fantastic barbeque, to be fair), that no one had really explored it. Not to say they’d all been on the deck the whole time. Hajime knew he’d talked to Mitarai in his quarters. Everyone had had their own rooms. Almost like the killing game…Hajime shook his head. Or real life. People had their own living
spaces in the real world. That would have been the more natural connection.

He looked at his own phone. The one Naegi and the others had provided to all of them, not the one they’d had before. He hadn’t forgotten about that one. Well, alright, he had a little, but it wasn’t a huge deal. The time was close to seven in the morning. He put it away again.

Wandering below the main deck, he stopped in the hallway featuring the rooms they’d stayed in for their travel. More precisely, he had stopped outside Nagito’s room. The last time he’d searched the other boy’s room had been…back then.

A dull pain in his mouth informed Hajime that he was biting down hard on his lower lip. He gingerly felt the area. No blood. Lowering his hand, he reached for the door. It opened easily. Noiselessly, even, which Hajime found mildly surprising. No need for Monokuma to pop up and shout more gibberish.

He stepped inside. The room was dark and musty. He flipped the switch, and the overhead light hummed its way to life. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing. It’s not like he’d expected to find anything here. Unlike the cottage, they had not been living here for a while. If he hadn’t already known the room had been Nagito’s, he could easily have assumed it had been empty the whole trip. Nothing was out of the place. Even the bed looked flawlessly maid. Looking at it evoked a tiny pang of shame for the state he’d left his own bed in.

He looked under the bed. Nothing. Well, no surprises there either. Actually it was more surprising that Nagito had left something under his bed back then. It was only the most obvious place to look. Or it would have been if not for the giant, glittery pink box he’d displayed on the table.

Straightening up, Hajime cast a final glance around the room before departing, flicking off the light as he left. Easing the door shut with a soft snap, he walked on, passing the other rooms and heading deeper into the ship. He paused briefly in the dining area. The room still looked like it belonged on a luxury cruise liner. Fancy red tablecloths and a small stage area…this would have been a nice area for the party yesterday.

Hajime had an abrupt vision of Nagito singing on that stage, and he hurriedly turned away, knocking over a tablecloth and all its arranged cutlery. He replaced them as quickly as possible and strode out of the room.

The lounge also proved fruitless. It did have a vast array of beanbag chairs and a number of small shelves stuffed with magazines, but it held nothing…nothing…Hajime didn’t even know. He couldn’t really explain why he was randomly wandering around the Future Foundation’s former ship. He was sort of hoping that they’d left something behind, something that would help to make sense of all this. The most information they’d gotten about the Future Foundation, after all, had come directly from Monokuma. But it looked like they’d done a masterful job sweeping the ship. No matter where he looked, Hajime found nothing out of the ordinary.

Finally he stopped in the infirmary. The last time he’d been in a place like this was when he talked to Mikan about Nagito’s sicknesses. Assuming that he even had them at all. It seemed like a safe assumption by this point. Between what Mikan and Izuru had said anyway. Nagito himself had said he’d just read it in a book to gain sympathy. Just because he liked fairy tales didn’t mean he couldn’t read other genres…..

Hajime stopped. Why would Nagito have wanted his sympathy at all? His feelings regarding the luckster weren’t complicated at all. Nagito was twisted and frightening, and every time he did something to reaffirm that image of himself, that smiling boy who’d stood by Hajime on the beach drifted a little further away. He’d dropped his conceptions of Nagito’s malice after learning the
truth about everyone, but even now, he felt like the progress he’d made was minimal. Or…
especially now, maybe? Before last night’s encounter in Fuyuhiko’s room, he’d started to think that
maybe they were getting somewhere.

Maybe his feelings were a little complicated.

Nagito’s, on the other hand…they had to be even more so, didn’t they? Glancing along the empty
shelves and cabinets, barely taking any of them in, Hajime mulled over his thoughts. The obvious
solution of simply asking Nagito would never work. And as much as didn’t want to admit it, he
knew that Nagito enjoyed him the most. Nagito himself told him that he was his favorite. That
meant it was unlikely that any of the others would know more about Nagito than he did. Izuru,
maybe, but he had yet to respond to, well, anything. The red eye still shone as brightly as ever
though.

With a start, Hajime realized he’d been staring at the same drawer for several seconds now. It held
what looked like a test tube rack, only bigger. A single, empty bottle sat on one end. A piece of
tape wrapped around it read ‘Cure W.’ That sounded familiar. Right. Mikan and – was it Kimura?
– had worked on that. The bottle was empty now though. Shrugging, Hajime closed the drawer
again.

He didn’t find much else of interest in the ship’s infirmary. Most of the supplies had already been
brought to the island. A box of bandages and a scalpel lay forgotten. He picked them up. The
scalpel slipped between his fingers and clattered to the floor. Groaning, Hajime bent down to
retrieve it.

As the cold metal reached his skin, he caught a glimpse of a scrap of paper beneath a cabinet.
Sliding it out, he held it up. Most of the paper had been torn away, and the bit that remained felt
dusty and gritty between his fingers. All he could make out were a few lines on the bottom.

*are the only ones whose physical conditions may hamper their conditions in the Neo World
Program. Discounting self-inflicted injuries resulting from despair, which should disappear
alongside the reconstructed memories. Further care may be needed.*

*Naegi, be careful.*

*Everything is for the sake of a future filled with hope.*

One of those lines clearly didn’t fit with the others. But from what remained, it looked to Hajime
like an analysis about how the simulated virtual world project might affect the people going into it.
The survivors of Hope’s Peak…the Remnants of Despair. All of them, in other words.

Not for the first time, he felt a strange rush of affection for Makoto Naegi. What would he have
done, had their positions been reversed? He liked to think he would have been able to believe as
well, but he couldn’t quite make himself believe that. Lying to himself was something he’d decided
to stop doing a long time ago. Even back in Mikan’s trial, it was like Chiaki had said. Doubting and
belief were both necessary.

Pocketing the paper, Hajime took the band aids and scalpel and left the room. He poked around the
ship for another half hour or so, but nothing else grabbed his interest. The sun loomed higher in the
sky as he disembarked the *Haima*. Foamy waves lapped against the sand.

A faint growl from his stomach convinced him to head to the restaurant. He strode back up the
beach, past the palm trees and ranch remains. Dropping off his findings in his cottage, Hajime
made his way back to the poolside and up the stairs to their usual breakfast hangout. After the big
party last night, he’d expected a lot of leftovers. He and Teruteru had spent a fair amount of time packaging them away, after all. Or at the very least, something quick and easy – cold cuts, fruit, and bread, maybe.

Apparently, the Ultimate Chef had other plans.

Omelets were laid out on one of the tables, along with several bowls of rice and pitchers of juice and water. Teabags were there too, though there were no signs of a kettle or hot water. A tray of toast lay on the other end of the table, with several condiments assorted before it.

Teruteru would have had to have gotten up at about the same time as Hajime to make all of this. Whatever other faults the guy had, he sure took cooking seriously.

Akane – naturally – and Mahiru were both up as well. Akane had four plates of food before her. Or, rather, two empty plates and one that was in the process of being eaten. Almost literally. Hajime watched as she placed one end of the plate into her mouth and tilted it so that the food spilled down. She saw him watching and said something, but deciphering what proved impossible.

Mahiru glanced up from where she sat. A near-empty bowl of rice sat before her. A pair of black chopsticks rested neatly on top of it. Her camera swung limply from the strap around her neck.

“Morning, Hajime.” She smoothed down her skirt.

“Morning,” Hajime returned, pouring himself a glass of orange juice. “Hiyko’s not with you?”

“Mmm.” Mahiru shook her head. “It’s early. Besides.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I don’t spend all my time with her, you know.”

“Of course,” Hajime said, lifting his drink to his lips. He hadn’t meant to imply she did…though come to think of it, Hiyoko did follow her around a lot. “By the way…thanks for all of your help. With Hiyoko and Mikan, but also with Mitarai.”

“Oh, geez.” Mahiru laid her head on her hand, but Hajime saw a trace of a smile flicker around her lips. “I thought you were supposed to be getting more reliable, Hajime. Man up already.”

“Ah…yeah.” Hajime said. He drank again, not really sure what to add onto that.

After a few seconds of listening to Akane scarf down food, Mahiru spoke again. “I tried to get a few pictures at the party last night, but the lighting wasn’t all that great. There’s only so much I can do about that here. It’s a shame, too. So many smiling faces.” She’d been turning over the camera around her neck with one hand while she spoke. Now she stopped, as if suddenly becoming aware of her actions. “I don’t suppose I’ll be getting a new one anytime soon.”

“Maybe Kazuichi could look at it?” Hajime suggested, avoiding the more difficult discussion about their confinement on Jabberwock Island. Not that confinement was the best word for it.

Mahiru must have sensed the dodge as well, because she let out a small huff. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Or maybe Naegi and the others could ship one over,” Hajime continued. “We all have phones now. You could contact them anytime you wanted.”

She folded her arms. “I suppose.”

Hajime saw an opportunity to change topics. “Speaking of phones, do you know what happened to the one we had before all this? You know, the one Nagito took before?”
“Hmm.” Mahiru held one finger against her head in thought. “Yeah, I think Fuyuhiko took it.”

“Fuyuhiko?” The surprise was not enough to make Hajime do a spit-take. Nobody did spit-takes in real life. “Why?”

Mahiru’s brows drew closer together. “I don’t know.” She said shortly.

Hajime sat down next to her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Sure didn’t sound like ‘nothing.’ “Mahiru….”

“Look, we’re working on it,” Mahiru said, turning to face him directly. “Violence is wrong. Killing is wrong. I still believe that.” Somehow her face grew even tighter, as if some force were compressing her features into a point of singularity. “When I heard about everything that happened after I…after that, I didn’t know what to think. Mikan and Ibuki and Hiyoko…and also Gundham and Nekomaru. Even Nagito and Chiaki. It was just—well, it wasn’t as bad as hearing about Junko Enoshima and everything she did…she made us do. That was why I wanted to go along with your idea so much. I just felt like I needed to do something.”

Mahiru picked up the chopsticks and poked around her bowl of rice for a few moments. “Guess we all wanted to do something. No one really knows what, but then, we’ll figure it out. It’s not like I want to be mad at Fuyuhiko and Peko forever.”

Hajime felt very hot and very cold at the same time. His insides churned. Like he was an ant Hiyoko was squishing. “You’re saying you haven’t forgiven them yet?”

“I guess.” Mahiru swished her chopsticks around again before setting them back down. She cast him a defiant glare. “You have a problem with that?”

“Huh? No.” Hajime shook his head. His juice lapped against the rim of the glass, threatening to escape. “Of course not. I just thought it was funny. I can understand that feeling.”

“Nagito?”

Hajime immediately glanced back, but no one was there. Then he realized Mahiru had been asking him, not greeting Nagito. He looked back at her and hoped she wasn’t laughing at his mistake. She wasn’t. So he nodded.

“Yes, well.” Mahiru pushed her bowl away. “I see your point. Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

Hajime took a deep breath.

“I keep going back and forth,” he said. “I find myself thinking that I want to understand him one moment and then being afraid of him later. There are times I want to forgive him and times I want to hit him.” He didn’t really know how much to say or how honest to be. He wasn’t even sure why Mahiru was the one he decided to voice all this to. Sometimes he didn’t think his own thought process was entirely reasonable. Every time Nagito did something, no matter how small it was, Hajime found himself feeling colder and colder toward him. More than anything else, he wanted to talk about it with Chiaki or Izuru. But Izuru wasn’t answering, and Chiaki….

“You really are so indecisive. Geez.” The words expressed annoyance, but Mahiru herself didn’t sound that upset. “I can’t tell you what to do or how to think or any of that. You’ll decide when you’re ready.”
Hajime didn’t think he would ever be ready. But as he wrestled to find a way to express his thoughts, he heard a faint cough from behind him. He and Mahiru turned to see Kazuichi entering the restaurant area. He was looking directly at them.

“Hey,” he said.

Akane shouted something that was probably a greeting, but once again, too much food had been crammed in her mouth to be certain. A few crumbs sprayed down her shirt.

Kazuichi picked up an apple and walked over to Hajime and Mahiru. “Couldn’t help overhearing that my soul brother was having problems,” he said, sinking into the seat on Hajime’s other side. “Don’t worry, my man! Fixing things is what I do best!”

“Mechanical things,” Mahiru said. Not meanly, but definitely with a faint note of disapproval. What was that about?

Fortunately, Kazuichi appeared to completely miss that. “Hey, I’m great with machines,” he said. “The elevator in Strawberry House and Komaeda’s arm.” He grinned, exposing his shark-like teeth. “Heck, Mahiru, if you ever need anyone to tinker with your camera – you know, to improve it or set up a sensor on it or something –”

“Thanks,” Mahiru said.

Kazuichi rubbed the apple on his off-yellow clothes. “Anyway, Haj.”

“Haj?” Hajime’s eyebrows soared up into his hair.

Kazuichi failed to notice this as well. “You don’t need to worry about Komaeda so much. It’s not healthy. The guy’s a creep. Yeah, I may not like him much, but you know…finally understanding why he betrayed everyone like that – well, it’s a better reason for betrayal than anyone else’s. That I’ve found anyway.”

Hajime thought it was more than a little ironic to be lectured about trust from Kazuichi of all people. But then again, the mechanic’s experiences with betrayal did give him…exactly that. Experience. For his part, Hajime had generally distanced himself from people. He’d never really been confident in himself and so had a harder time making friends. Especially when people mocked him for attending Hope’s Peak’s Reserve Department.

“He seemed so nice at first too.” Kazuichi shook his head slightly. “It’s too bad.”

“Oh yeah,” Mahiru nodded. “He was the only one who stayed with Hajime after he passed out on the beach.” She narrowed her eyes. “Glad you haven’t done that again, by the way. You learned to man up in situations like that.”

Even though his mind raced like a pulsing heart, Hajime managed a weak smile. “Does that mean I’m not ‘unreliable Hinata’ anymore?”

Mahiru’s lips curled up into a smirk. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“Guess I’ll take it.” Hajime sighed. He was barely paying attention to the conversation now. He’d felt it when Kazuichi spoke. Like a burst of light in the back of his mind. Like something had finally clicked into place…something he might have known for ages now and yet never wanted to confront. Almost as if he’d made himself forget that, even back in the simulation, it had never just been Nagito.
Kazuichi slid slightly closer to Hajime. “So, ah, soul brother, now that I’ve helped you out, you should return the favor.”

Hajime very distinctly remembered what had occurred last time this happened. “Sonia’s not planning another beach party, is she?”

Kazuichi nearly fell off his chair. “How did you know?”

Wait—really? She really was? They’d just had a poolside party. And not only that, but this obsession with Sonia…it had always been bad, but Hajime thought he’d been doing better. He’d hoped so at the very least.

Mahiru played idly with her bangs. “Yeah. She really loved last night. She came to my room really early this morning to talk about it.” Somehow, that news didn’t surprise Hajime that much. If anything, he found it almost touching that Sonia made sure to go to Mahiru first. After the last time they’d tried to arrange a beach party…well, Sonia really was considerate.

“Is that today?” Hajime asked, trying to mask his incredulity and re-immerses himself in the conversation at the same time. Neither of them noticed his momentary lapse.

“Yeah,” Mahiru answered.

“Why not?” Kazuichi chuckled, folding his hands behind his head. “Not like we have much else to do.”

Well, he couldn’t really argue with that, so Hajime settled for a noncommittal shrug. It wasn’t that he was passing on the conversation. He just didn’t know what to say yet. How everyone would work to spread a bit of hope in the world if they just stayed on this island. He wasn’t avoiding dealing with something that difficult. It took time, that was all. Time.

Saving the Future Foundation might have counted for some of them, but Hajime doubted it. It didn’t feel like enough. Mitarai was the most obvious example of that. Marking themselves as Remnants of Despair, enemies of the world—it was ironic. Complicating their own paths to redemption with that sacrifice…desiring something and making it harder for themselves. He almost could have laughed. Almost.

“Alright!” Akane jumped up, slamming her fist into her other palm. “I’m all fired up now! Where ya at, Coach Nidai?” Without a backward glance, she barreled out of the restaurant and leapt down the stairs. A loud crashing sound immediately followed. Hajime and the others stood up and hurried over.

Both Akane and Mikan were sprawled out on the ground. But while Akane had fallen normally, Mikan was…well, that hadn’t changed.

Hajime averted his gaze.

“Hey, are you two alright?” Mahiru asked, beating him by asking a second earlier.

Akane rubbed her forehead. “I’m fine.” A wide grin grew across her face. “I’ll just rub some spit on this. Good as new!”

Kazuichi went silent for a few seconds before slowly lifting a hand to his mouth. “Your own spit?”

Ignoring the fact that his friend had turned into Teruteru for a second, Hajime started down the steps. Mahiru followed him.
“Neh…I’m okay,” sniffled Mikan. “B-but—eek!” She’d tried to right herself from her compromising position and somehow made it even worse. Letting loose another high-pitched squeal, Mikan began sobbing. “I’m sorry!”

“Enough. Shh. Here.” Mahiru bent and began helping her up. “Hajime!”

“Huh…oh, right.” Hajime moved to help, and between them, they had Mikan sitting properly on the ground. Her cheeks still shone faintly, and every few seconds or so, she would hiccup.

For her part, Akane had sprung back to her feet. She lightly patted her cheeks. “Alright! That was a great practice! Thanks, Mikan!” Giving the nurse a cheery thumbs-up, Akane ran off. That girl. Once again, she didn’t even wait for a response. Hajime shook his head.

The same sentiment was written across Mahiru’s face. “Geez.” She put her hands on her hips. “What a mess.”

“Right?” The word felt too simple to fully express his agreement, but Mahiru understood anyway.

“Hey, Mikan!” Kazuichi grinned. “You came here for breakfast too, right? I haven’t eaten yet either, so come on.”

“Eh?” She looked up through water-filled eyes. “R-really?”

“Yeah!”

Hajime felt a slight frown tugging at the edges of his lips as he watched Kazuichi and Mikan disappear into the restaurant. It wasn’t that he expected anything to happen, even with Teruteru in there, but—

“Think he’s just trying to get more information about Sonia’s plan?” Mahiru asked, folding her arms across her chest.

“Mmm. Yeah, maybe.” Hajime allowed, with only partial reluctance.

“Geez. Boys.” Mahiru seemed torn between rolling her eyes and sighing. “I remember seeing a show once where this was this girl who always called boys ‘degenerate males.’ I don’t think I could go that far myself, but sometimes I wonder.” She trailed off, absently fiddling with her camera.

“Right,” Hajime said. How exactly was he supposed to respond to that?

“Right.” Mahiru parroted. “Well, I’m going to go get Hiyoko and meet up with Sonia.” She folded her hands behind her back as she gave Hajime a small smile. “See you, Hajime.”

“Huh? Oh, ah…see you later.”

He watched until she disappeared as well. Left alone on the poolside, he glanced up. The sky was a cloudless sapphire. Another beautiful beach day. Still no rain…those clouds from earlier had disappeared. Well, it’s not like he had any complaints about that.

Hajime left the hotel area and crossed back over to the second island. He passed Peko and Fuyuhiko near the bridge. Peko gave him a short, stiff nod. Fuyuhiko didn’t acknowledge him at all. Better to just let that go for now. Especially with what he’d witnessed the other night. He’d just talked with Mahiru about this as well. Everyone was trying at least. That was something.
He stopped outside the library. This seemed like an isolated enough spot. Reaching into his jeans, he took out the phone Naegi had given him—rather, one of the phones all of them received. No sooner had he started dialing though when he sensed someone behind him.

Sliding the phone back into his pants, he turned just in time to crash into Nagito. The sand slipped beneath him, and for a moment, he lost his sense of balance completely. The sky seemed to tilt at an angle. He reached out instinctively, spinning in place. When everything corrected itself, Hajime realized that, while they both remained standing, he was tightly gripping Nagito’s shoulders. It looked like he’d held onto the other and spun slightly to keep them upright.

The grace behind that felt more like an Izuru type of move than his own.

Letting go of Nagito, Hajime brushed himself down. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, Hinata-kun.” Nagito bent and picked up the book he’d dropped in their shuffle. “Er – Hinata. What luck to run into you here.” He straightened up with a friendly smile on his face. “Were you heading to the library? Don’t let me stop you.”

“Nagito,” Hajime called. The lucky student stopped, glancing back at him over his shoulder. His mechanical hand receded into his coat pocket.

Hajime took a deep breath. “What were you going to say last night? Before Ibuki crashed into the room?”

“Mm.” Nagito tilted his head to the right. “Did I thank you for fixing my arm? Thank you.”

Yeah. Okay. Hajime felt like he’d already been thanked for that, but sure. “You’re welcome.”

Nagito’s footsteps faded away, and soon enough, Hajime found himself alone. He reached back into his pocket. A slight breeze picked up, and he felt his ahoge wave from side-to-side. The ocean stretched out before him, and while it didn’t feel as opposing as before, it wasn’t exactly welcoming either. His grip tightened around the phone.

Before he could even start dialing, a plop sound resonated from somewhere behind him. A small coconut had fallen out of a palm tree. Walking over to it, he nudged it with his toe. The coconut rolled slightly before settling again in the sand. Hajime looked down at it and then out at the ocean again. Nothing but blue, blue as far as the eye could see. This was the same ocean connecting them to the outside world. To Naegi and the Future Foundation, to Japan, to the world. He didn't know whether or not to find that thought comforting. At one time, he might have. But now he felt something else. A familiar knot of anxiety wound its way through him, and the dream he'd had earlier this morning flashed through his mind, spinning like the voting time wheel.

This wasn't despair.

This wasn't despair, but...

Why did he feel like this?

Unclenching his fist, Hajime turned and entered the library.

Chapter End Notes
Hey, everyone! As always, thanks for reading! :-) 

So...about continuing this. Given that Killer Killer really messed up my plans by returning from hiatus right when I released the chapter featuring them, I'm posing it to you guys. 

Should I continue with using Killer Killer's characters (thereby breaking with their canon)? Or should use a couple of my original characters instead? (I promise they're not Mary Sue self-inserts.) I'd appreciate hearing what you guys think, like, or would want to see.
It wasn’t exactly like he’d expected the library to resemble a murder scene or anything. No pool of blood, no body—none of that. The strange feeling he’d felt hadn’t been the furious denial right before encountering a body. That much he knew. The dread slumbering beneath the table, in the beach house, in the music venue, in Grape Tower, and even the malice in the warehouse—all of that had felt decisively different. Then again, that might have been because he’d already known what he would find, and he’d simply, desperately, tried to convince himself otherwise. Just like Teruteru had done with hearing how they’d lost all their school memories. This time, though, Hajime genuinely didn’t know what to expect. So…since he didn’t know, he couldn’t call finding nothing to be a surprise.

His footsteps echoed throughout the empty library. Despite the sun’s rising prominence, the room remained chilly. He rubbed his arms as he continued looking around. A small pile of books had been arranged neatly on a table. Briefly glancing over the titles, Hajime saw nothing that stood out to him. Not that one should judge a book by its title, but…these looked to be works about complex biology, psychology, astronomy, and…hm. He was pretty sure the letters on that one were English, despite not speaking it himself. Not that he hadn’t learned. English was definitely taught to students in most, ah, normal schools, but he’d never excelled at that subject. Or any subject really. But this was no time to feel sorry for himself.

Was Nagito reading these? If Nagito was trying to hide something, he would have done it better than this. They were probably someone else’s. Although they didn’t seem like Sonia’s style, and Hajime wasn’t certain whether or not anyone besides those two spoke English fluently. Well, could read it fluently, anyway. It didn’t matter.

Izuru? You want to read any of these?

No answer. Of course. It was too early in the morning to sigh as much as he had. As long as he could still sense the other presence in his mind, he wasn’t worried. Not about losing him, anyway. As for saving him, well, sad to say that he hadn’t had any brilliant ideas yet. The closest idea he’d had reeked of Enoshima. It involved downloading Izuru’s personality from the Neo World Program into another body. But then again, the program had rebuilt Hajime’s personality. Izuru’s shouldn’t have been entered into it. Hajime had a feeling he could create an artificial construction of Izuru Kamukura easily enough, but they didn’t have any spare bodies. And with any luck, there wouldn’t be any. No, not luck. There wouldn’t be. Everyone would see to that.

And an artificial intelligence wouldn’t be the same as the original anyway, would it?

Hajime pulled out a chair and sat at the table. He held his phone in his hands. It weighed heavily, like a metal brick. The doors remained closed. Dialing quickly, he lifted the device to his ear.

“Hinata-kun?” A cool female voice answered on the second ring.

Hajime scrunched up his face. “Kirigiri-san?”

“Correct.” Anyone else might have thought her voice resided in a permanent, flat monotone. But Hajime had spent enough time talking with Izuru to realize that reports of Kirigiri’s emotionlessness had been overstated. She wasn’t as lively as, say, Ibuki, but there was still
something there. Although, to be fair, nobody was as lively as Ibuki.

He’d more of been hoping to talk to Naegi. Kirigiri was harder to read. Not compared to Nagito, perhaps, but Hajime had a hard time telling what she was really thinking. She’d definitely stuck up for all of them in the simulation though, so at the very least, she’d proven herself trustworthy. And then there was all the business with the Cure W. Kimura really had been incredible.

The way that thought sounded reminded him of Nagito again. It might have just been the cold, or maybe a sudden breeze, but he shivered slightly.

“Hinata-kun?” Kirigiri’s voice raised in pitch…slightly. A single notch. “Are you still there?”


“Are you surprised that I answered?” Kirigiri cut aside any need for small talk. Hajime didn’t mind. After so long of feeling like he’d had to talk circles around just about everything, a little bluntness was appreciated. Maybe that was another reason he enjoyed talking with Mahiru.

“A little, yeah,” he admitted.

“Hmm. So? What can I do for you?”

“Well.” It wasn’t like he could say ‘I have no idea why I called you. Just felt right.’ “We were wondering if it would be possible to include a decent camera in the next shipment.” There, Mahiru.

A brief silence followed that statement. One that Hajime was sure that, had silence been capable of speech, would have said something along the lines of ‘did you actually call me for that?’ “I see,” Kirigiri finally said. “Anything else?”

“It worked, right?” Hajime asked.

Another silence followed that question, but this one came without an awkward feeling.

“Yes,” Kirigiri answered. “As far as we can tell, the world fully believes that the Remnants of Despair are responsible. It hasn’t been long enough since that happened for any significant reconstruction yet, but we plan to begin disseminating false information about your location soon. That should help keep people off the trail.”

Another pause. “That was a big sacrifice you made.”

“Yeah.” Hajime agreed. “That’s, well.” He wasn’t sure what to say, but he decided not to create another long silence. “We’re not so sure what to do now, really.”

“No wonder you wanted to talk to Makoto.” Hajime could have almost thought she sounded amused. “You do realize he’d just tell you to believe in yourself and your friends? All of them,” she added.

All of them? What was that supposed to mean? “Yeah, I know. Although someone once told me that doubt was necessary for belief.”

“Hm. I suppose it is.” A faint sigh came from the other end of the phone. “If you’re looking on advice for actions, there’s not much I can say. You must have known how much harder you’d make it for yourselves by publicly taking the blame like that.”

“Right.” He had known. He had. Nagito’s words from the boat resurfaced in his mind. A hope
without sacrifice. The same as before. Perhaps he’d been right about that after all.

“A lot of people would probably say that you all took a giant step toward atonement by doing that though,” she continued in a slightly softer tone. “But if you’re calling me like this, then I can only assume you and the others don’t feel that way. Or you don’t feel like it was enough. Correct?”

Hajime nodded. Then remembered that he was on the phone. “Right.” His throat seemed to have swollen shut. The word forced its way out, dropping from him like a stone.

“Nothing I can say will change that feeling.” Kirigiri sounded cold again.

Hajime waited for her to elaborate, but she didn’t. A dry chuckle escaped his lips. “You know, I think Naegi would have given us a better pep talk.”

“Maybe,” Kirigiri said, but Hajime found it easy to imagine a faint smile on her face. “You all chose a difficult path. But we’re here to support you where we can. We’d be happy to talk over any plans you do come up with. As well as send you whatever supplies we can. Cameras included. Better?”

Now it was Hajime’s turn to smile. “Better.”

“I’ll tell Makoto you called. He’ll be relieved. He wanted to check in with all of you anyway.”

“Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Kirigiri-san.”

“You’re welcome.”

A faint beep followed that remark, and Hajime knew Kirigiri had hung up. He did so as well, slowly lowering the phone to his side. She hadn’t told him anything he didn’t already know. But it seemed like the mass of anxiety gnawing away at him had loosened slightly. Of course, that was a regular part of the pattern too. But following this train of thought would only result in needless negativity. He dealt with enough of that already.

Putting the phone away, Hajime got up and left the library. The air outside was notably warmer, and he took a moment to bask in the tropical island’s warmth. The ocean had a calming effect. Not because he was looking at it—every time he did that, he seemed to sink deeper into that abyss of anxiousness. But he could listen to it. A little like holding a seashell up to your ear, except this sounded several times louder. But that was okay too. The waves surged in and out. He knew what to expect. It was better that way.

Guess we really are opposites, huh, Izuru?

Nothing. Again.

Hajime permitted himself another sigh and trudged back toward the first island. As he reached the bridge, though, something caught his eye. There appeared to be something far out in the sea, little more than a silhouette against the horizon. It looked like a large boat. A really large boat—more a ship, really. He blinked and squinted, practically willing the shape into clearer focus, but it had disappeared. He blinked again, this time in surprise. Had he imagined it? Sure enough, the sky and ocean were clear now. Nothing in sight. He stood there for a few minutes, letting the wind slide off his skin. The horizon remained empty.

As he set his foot on the bridge, Hajime noticed Gundham heading into the pharmacy. Should he follow? He mulled over the thought for a few seconds before deciding against it. Gundham was probably looking for his missing hamster, and Hajime wasn’t in the mood to decipher his
fantastical speech. He had enough on his mind already.

Back on the first island, Hajime made his way toward his cottage. Before he could reach it, however, an explosive shout erupted from the beach. His feet moved before his brain, and by the time he realized he was running in that direction, he’d practically already arrived.

He saw an unbelievable sight.

Or at least, it would have been unbelievable if this didn’t set off a very familiar memory.

Nekomaru and Akane were brawling—sparring—on the beach. Akane leapt what must have been a good five feet in the air and launched a kick at Nekomaru’s head. He ducked under it and came up instantly, grabbing her other leg and tossing her onto the ground.

“BWAHAHAHA!” He bellowed so forcefully that electricity seemed to radiate from his body. “Come on, Akane! Show me your fighting spirit!”

“Damn!” Akane staggered to her feet. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, revealing a huge grin. “Bring it, old man! I’m coming!”

She charged him again, and the two collided with an earsplitting roar.

Hajime just turned and walked away. His heartbeat gradually steadied again. He still, still, still did not understand why their battles always sounded like somebody was getting murdered, but at least it kept them busy. More than that, they enjoyed it. Not to mention those massages….

Gah! What were these thoughts? Rapidly shaking his head, Hajime hurried into his cottage and shut the door behind him. There were still several hours before Sonia’s party was scheduled to start. Kazuichi wanted him to crash it again. True, they wouldn’t find a body this time, but even so, he couldn’t muster much excitement for the prospect. Then again, there wasn’t much else to do. And Sonia probably knew about that plan, given Mahiru’s statement earlier. Mahiru may have been a great caregiver, but she still had a tendency to favor the girls. Though given her family life, Hajime didn’t really blame her for that.

Hajime lay back on his bed to think. His own mind felt like a maze to him. An alien maze which twisted and turned and redrew itself every few seconds. Ripples fading away in a pond. Izuru sat unresponsive in its center, in its bottom, and for every thought Hajime pinned down, two more slipped by him. He figured he could use some time to just…think. Contemplate it all, maybe.

He placed his hands over his face, as if to hide his red eye even from himself.

His deep introspection fell apart when someone knocked at the door. Groaning, he sat up. “What is it?” He called.

No response, other than a second knock.

He’d seldom wanted to give a second groan—okay, that wasn’t true. Stifling that urge, Hajime rose up from the bed and walked over to the door. It opened easily, and to his surprise, he saw Mitarai standing there.

“Mi—”

That was as far as he got before Mitarai darted into the room like a rabbit.

“What—?” Hajime stepped back instinctively. He turned to keep Mitarai in his field of vision,
pushing the door closed with his foot. “Mitarai-kun? What is it?”

Mitarai had stopped a few feet inside the room. He watched Hajime now, waiting until the door was closed to speak. “I—I wanna know what we’re doing,” he said quietly.

Hajime raised an eyebrow. “That’s why you burst in here?”

Mitarai flinched a little. “Well…no. That would be, well, that is….” He glanced at the ground and lightly bit his finger. “Komaeda was acting weird.”

“Nagito?” Somehow this news failed to surprise Hajime. “What do you mean?”

“He kept pressuring me to talk about the, you know, the video.” Mitarai’s voice got quieter and quieter as he spoke until he was practically whispering. “He seemed really interested in it. I told him the truth though. That I got rid of it.”

“Why would he be interested in that?” Hajime asked. “He helped us stop—” He cut himself off, remembering who he was talking to, but from the way Mitarai’s face fell, it was too late.

“Yeah,” Mitarai said after a moment. “You don’t have to stop for my sake. I know what you meant.” He looked away and lowered his head, letting his hair act like a curtain. “It’s my fault.”

“We talked about this,” Hajime said. “Isn’t that why you decided to come with us?” He almost felt, as he had then, that he was supposed to tell Mitarai it wasn’t his fault. That it was Enoshima’s. Naegi probably wouldn’t have hesitated to say exactly that. But Hajime wasn’t Naegi, and he already knew that neither of them believed that. Just like none of them believed that being brainwashed exonerated them from blame.

“Y-yeah.” Mitarai’s answer sounded shaky. He tugged at his sleeve. “I expected—I don’t know what I expected. Not this, I guess.”

Hajime felt a flicker of irritation. “This?”

“Being so….” Mitarai licked his lips as he struggled to explain himself. “Accepted, I guess. By everyone. You know?”

Oh. That. That was better than what Hajime had thought he might say. “I do know,” he agreed. Everyone had been remarkably accepting of his lack of talent. Back when he thought he lacked talent, anyway. And…not everyone. But most of them. “Anyway, what did you want?” A bit harsh, he realized, but the words had already been spoken. “Something about knowing what we’re doing?”

“Mhm.” Mitarai nodded. The gesture more closely resembled a bird bobbing its head than a nod.

“I’d like to know the answer to that myself.” Hajime decided to opt for honesty. “I’m working on it. If you have any ideas, I’d love to hear them.”


“Mitarai.” It proved too difficult to keep a scolding lilt out of his tone. “There are no—everyone’s ideas are worthwhile,” he amended hastily. They’d been derailed too many times in class trials for him to say that there were no bad ideas. Then again, sometimes, even the most random suggestions proved useful.

Mitarai gave another hesitant nod. “I suppose. I thought maybe we could disguise ourselves or
something? They all know our faces and names, so maybe that would work?”

Hajime closed his eyes, keeping his hands near his sides. He’d considered that possibility before. It seemed risky and left a lot up to luck. No one besides him and Nagito could really rely on that with certainty. They didn’t have an Ultimate Costumer or Cosplayer or anything like that in their group. Even if the Future Foundation were able to send them new clothes or hair dyes or whatever else, they—

How did the Ultimate Imposter do it?

Hajime wasn’t sure what made him realize that. Maybe it was Mitarai’s presence, or the fact that they’d been talking about disguises. It wasn’t like an imposter could help disguise someone else’s identity. But if there existed even the smallest possibility there….

“Thanks, Mitarai.” Hajime said.

“Wha—?” He blinked and brushed his finger against his cheek. “You think it’s a good idea?”

“Maybe.” Hajime brushed that aside. “Do you know how Twogami does his impersonations?”

“Eh?” Perhaps Hajime had sounded too enthusiastic. Mitarai stepped back, now scratching at the back of his neck. “Oh, um, not really. I mean, he asked me if he could use my identity because he had to give up his other form. I guess that’s not very useful. I was always focused on my anime anyway. Sorry. You should ask him.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” That’s right. This could work. At the very least, it was something, a tangible action he could take. That knowledge alone helped him feel a bit better.

“Okay.” It might have been his imagination, but Mitarai sounded somewhat reassured. “Good. Good. That might work. He’s—Twogami—he’s good at that stuff.” That’s right. Mitarai and Twogami were close. Hajime didn’t know exactly what their relationship had been, but even he could tell that much.

“You enjoy the party last night?” Hajime asked.

“What? Oh. Yeah, I guess so.” Mitarai shook his head lightly, knocking his bangs aside. “Mahiru’s pictures were really something. They didn’t move. I mean, of course they didn’t. They didn’t have the same life as animation. And you know, I thought that was a shame. Almost a loss. Something that good really should be animated. At least, that’s what I thought.”

“She’d probably like that,” Hajime mused. “We don’t really have the stuff here to do that though.” And they were unlikely to get it either. Setting up a computer seemed more than a little out of their reach. Water and lights were one thing, but their island wasn’t exactly an urban hub.

“I know,” Mitarai said sadly. “Maybe that’s for the best.”

“Maybe,” Hajime said softly.

Mitarai straightened up. “Anyway, I feel a bit better now. Thanks.” He moved past Hajime toward the door. “Do you want me to get, er, Twogami?”

“No, I’ll find him later.” Hajime replied.

“Okay. See you then.”
“Yeah. Later.”

Mitarai slipped out, closing the door behind him. Hajime looked at it for a few seconds. At the very least, Twogami could be a way for them to connect with the outside. He could disguise himself and see what people in the area thought about the Remnants. Of course, the odds of finding an area where they could actually help out without being immediately recognized were slim. But Enoshima had left a lot of destruction in the world. There had to be something they could do. Something, anything.

In the meantime though, what could he do here? Fuyuhiko and Nagito both needed a talking-to—again—but Hajime found himself filled with reluctance at the idea. That wasn’t new exactly. In Fuyuhiko’s case, it would all be fine, so long as he was in a good mood. As for Nagito…Hajime couldn’t decide what frightened him for. The idea of yet another conversation where they got nowhere or the idea of yet another conversation where they did.

He didn’t need to consult Chiaki or Izuru though. Everything may have been confusing, but at least in this case, the right answer shone so brightly that no one could have missed it.

Opening his door, Hajime automatically lifted his arm to shield his eyes. His room hadn’t been that dark, and he hadn’t been in there that long. He blinked in the sunlight, feeling almost catlike. Mitarai had already disappeared. In fact, he couldn’t see anyone. People had either secluded themselves in their cabins or else scattered off to their own little corner of the island. Or, he supposed, a few of them might be getting a late breakfast in the restaurant. Thanks to Teruteru, there was nearly always food laid out there. Of course, thanks to Akane, it usually disappeared pretty quickly.

He walked over to Nagito’s cabin and knocked on the door. No response. He knocked again and waited a few seconds. Still nothing. Well, if he’d just been bothering Mitarai, then he couldn’t have gone far. Darn it! He should have just grabbed him outside the library earlier. But no, he—he hadn’t.

Just as he turned away, he heard the door open, and that familiar, quiet voice called his name. Looking back, he saw Nagito standing there. His normally poofy hair clung tightly to his head. Water dripped out of it. Though the door concealed most of his body, Hajime could make out a towel wrapped around him.

“Hinata?” Nagito repeated. It still sounded as if it took a great effort for him to drop the honorific. “What luck! I’d just stepped in the shower when I heard you knocking. Did you need something?”

“No, it’s…” Hajime averted his gaze. “Look, you can finish showering first. It’s fine.”

“No, I couldn’t make you wait for someone like me. I’ll just go shut it off and—”

“It’s fine,” Hajime repeated, stressing the words and trying not to grit his teeth. Try as he might, it still irritated the crap out of him whenever Nagito talked about himself like that.

Nagito cocked his head to one side. “If you’re sure.”

Hajime gave a short, stiff nod, and Nagito retreated back into his room. The door shut with a soft snap. Hajime slid his hands into his pockets and walked off. Fuyuhiko was out with Peko. They spent a lot of time together. After everything that had happened, he couldn’t blame them. They made a nice couple too. There seemed to be a few of those on the island. Not just Fuyuhiko and Peko, but Sonia and Gundham and also Akane and Nekomaru. Although those last two may not have noticed it. Hajime distinctly remembering overhearing the conversation between Fuyuhiko
and Akane in Strawberry House. Drawing any other conclusion struck him as unlikely.

Not for the first time, a memory of Chiaki flitted through his mind. He shook his head.

There were plenty of people still single. He didn’t need to worry. Actually, there was no reason for him to even be worried in the first place. The whole idea was silly. None of that mattered right now. There were more important things to consider.

Yeah. More important things. Like—focus, Hajime. Like getting out. No, not getting out, like deciding how they were going to help the world recover from despair. The way they had with each other.

Aimlessly, Hajime found that he’d walked over by Rocketpunch Market. Might as well check it out. They’d taken out just about all the salvageable food for the party the other night. Most of it was kept stored by now. Probably in one of the few working freezers they’d managed to set up. But he hadn’t been as careful about the other supplies. Partly because he didn’t see a need to keep an inventory or anything. The killing game was over. But looking over it now, he couldn’t help but notice just how much stuff there was. Ropes, light bulbs, clothes, stationery—even a shot put ball. The market was basically a collection of random goods.

Most of it wasn’t organized particularly well though. Before they’d awoken from the Neo World Program, the island had been largely uninhabited. They’d all already seen that for themselves. But the general clutter of the store made it impossible to tell where most things had originally been and if they were all still there.

Everything was a mess. What an apt metaphor.

No, no it wasn’t. He needed to stop thinking that way. Things were definitely improving. They were. Slowly but surely, everyone was beginning to get along. To unite behind a common goal. Usami would have been proud. Chiaki too.

And it wasn’t just a common goal either. It was almost like a family. A disorganized family, perhaps, but a family nonetheless. After everything all of them had suffered together, after everything they’d all done to and for each other—all of that had led them here. That much, at least, Hajime knew he could believe in.

He picked up a pair of night-vision goggles from a shelf. They were actually here. Just like they had been back then. But there wouldn’t be any more killing now.

As he replaced the goggles, a sound caught his attention. A footstep. An uncomfortable feeling crawled along his neck. A little like that feeling you had when you knew someone was behind you with a bladed object. His hair was normally spiky and straight anyway, but now it stood even more rigid, as if trying to pull away from his body.

He whirled around. Nothing. No one was there.

With a frown weighing down his face, he stalked among the shelves, searching all over the market. But there was no one in there. He didn’t think he’d imagined that feeling. Silently, he stumped over to the exit. No trace of anyone out here either. No footprints in the sand besides his own. The wind might have blown over the others, but his were still too recent. Which meant that anyone who’d crept up on him would have been even more recent. So…nothing?

Using footprints in the sand for deductions felt a little too familiar for his taste.

Izuru? Was that you?
More nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Had something upset him that badly? He’d mentioned something like that the last time they’d talked. The despair of a god wasting away to nothing.

Look, I’m still trying to help you too, okay? I haven’t given up. It’d be easier if you would talk to me though. You’re—”

He paused. Inasmuch as one could pause one’s thoughts, anyway. It hurt his pride a little to admit that Izuru was smarter than him, but that was the truth. Nagito and Chiaki had helped him learn not to run away from that.

Of course, none of it mattered anyway, because Izuru could still hear him like this. Even though the reverse was, frustratingly, not true.

I’ll keep trying.

As the promise receded into his mind, Hajime stepped out of the market. Nagito had probably finished by now. Taking a last look around yielded no new discoveries. With nothing left to do, he returned to Nagito’s cabin and, once again, knocked on the door.

It opened almost instantly. Nagito stood there, dressed in his usual green coat and…whatever the hell those shoes were. His black-and-white mechanical arm didn’t look wet at all. His hair, by way of contrast, still hung limply around his head.

“Ah, Hinata,” Nagito said slowly. And he usually spoke a little slowly, so that was saying something. “Perfect timing! Aha, I was just about to come find you.” He wore a relaxed, friendly smile. “What can I do for you?”

Where to even begin? “What did you want with Mitarai?”

“Hmm? Oh.” Nagito chortled. “I was interested in how he made his video. And Enoshima too, for that matter. How something like hope or despair could be coded into a physical medium. Ah, I truly thought that would be a fascinating process.”

“What are you talking about?” Hajime asked. It felt almost silly to ask that and hope for a straightforward answer, but Nagito had improved a lot lately, so maybe…. 

“I was interested in how an animator could control hope or despair,” Nagito said. “I mean if he could, then other people should be able to, right? If you could stimulate people’s brainwaves through subconscious signaling and such, then it couldn’t just be Mitarai.” He lifted his prosthetic hand slightly, staring at it. “Ah, the whole thing sounds like nonsense anyway.”

“Nonsense,” Hajime repeated. Did Nagito mean that? It didn’t seem like one of his tricks. But he’d evidently been thinking about it a lot, and Nagito didn’t seem like someone who spent a lot of time thinking about things he considered nonsense. Even if other people did.

“Huh? Am I wrong?” Despite the tone, Nagito didn’t look surprised.

“It’s not that,” Hajime said. “I just – I wouldn’t have thought you’d be interested in a hope like that.” Come to think of it, that could be why he considered it nonsense.

“Hmm.” Nagito brushed his chin. “Perhaps you’re right. It wouldn’t be the kind of hope I’ve been searching for.”

Hajime’s eyes flashed over to meet Nagito’s. “Past tense?”
Nagito smiled. “I told you before, didn’t I? I want to see a hope without sacrifice now. Haven’t yet, but it’s something I might be able to find with, ah, everyone.”

Hajime exhaled slowly. Almost a sigh. “You talk about it so easily now.”

“Is that bad?” Nagito’s shoulders fell slightly. “Oh. I can—”

“No, no.” Hajime added hastily. “No, it’s good, it’s—yeah, it’s good.”

Silence crept up between them. Hajime cleared his throat.

“So.” Nagito said after a moment. “Did you, ah, need anything else?”

“Oh. Right.” This whole conversation wasn’t going how he’d planned. Then again, he hadn’t really had a plan in the first place. So he supposed he couldn’t really complain. “I guess. I just sorta… wanted to talk to you.”

“To me?” Nagito looked nearly as ecstatic as Kazuichi when Sonia showered him with praise. “Oh, Hinata, you’re so kind. Wanting to spend time with me.”

Hajime mastered his impulse to cut him off, but he did pinch the bridge of his nose. “I think I told you this before, Nagito. You shouldn’t talk about yourself like that. Okay? You’re as worthy as the rest of us.” Which…in all honesty, may not have been much, considering what they’d done. But they were working on that. That’s what mattered.

At least, he hoped it did.

To Hajime’s surprise and relief, Nagito didn’t argue the point. “What should we talk about?”

That was almost a worse question. “Well….” He’d never been one for small talk. “How are you doing?” Great. Small talk. So much for that. Damn it, Hajime.

Nagito was silent for so long that Hajime thought he was being silently judgmental. Not that he could blame him for that. It had been a stupid question.

“Are you worried about me?” Oh, God, this again. Except Nagito didn’t follow that up with a self-deprecating comment. Meaning Hajime was the one who’d rushed to judgment. Biting the inside of his cheek, he looked away. Which was apparently the wrong move, because Nagito made a sad little sigh. “Ah, perhaps I’ve misunderstood.”

“You seemed to enjoy the party last night,” Hajime decided. “Winning all those hands at Uno and all.”

“Oh, I’m lucky,” Nagito said nonchalantly.

“Yeah.” There it was. The crux behind everything. Based on everything Nagito had told him, everything he knew now, he felt certain that that luck was central to…sorting out whatever this was. They’d been making progress on that right before they’d left to help the others. What was it Nagito had said then? Something about dreading the next bad luck?

“Komaeda…..” Hajime took a deep breath. “Are you lucky?”

“Huh?” This time, the surprised tone matched his features. “Do you doubt that, Hinata? Even after everything?”

“No, no, I meant—do you feel lucky?”
Nagito folded his arms. “I’m not sure that matters. But yes, I do.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well.” Nagito stared down at his original hand. He slowly turned it around, studying it intently. He still looked so pale. “I’m not really sure how to answer that, haha.” Hajime opened his mouth to ask him to try, but Nagtio was already speaking again. “Back in the Neo World Program, I thought that the opportunity to come across so much despair was lucky. That doesn’t happen every day.”

Yup. There was the kind of thinking that was so alien, so baffling, that Hajime once again had to wonder whether he could ever understand it. A tiny throbbing sensation began growing in his head. “Uhm…okay. What about now?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Nagito said. He seemed honest too. His usual noncommittal, evasive answers seemed to be happened less and less frequently. Hajime wasn’t sure whether this one supported or countered that trend. Some progress still counted as progress though. After all, it was the same for him. And probably for everyone else too. So that meant he couldn’t write this off. And, though he would not have admitted it aloud, he didn’t want to.

“What would help you decide?”

A bit of laughter from behind him reminded Hajime that they were still standing in the doorway. Glancing back, he saw Mahiru and Hiyoko walking over toward the bridge and beach area. Hiyoko was skipping along without looking over at them. Mahiru gave a small wave, which he returned. “Maybe we should do this inside?” Hajime suggested.

Nagito’s eyes widened. “What? Really? You want to visit me in my room?” It hadn’t been said with a terror of a normal teen protesting a parent’s entry. Instead he had reverted to his usual self-deprecating the room. ‘You’re too good to visit that room’ was the implication.

“If that makes you uncomfortable, it doesn’t have to be there,” Hajime answered. It’s not like he was worried about being overheard or anything. It was more like…huh. On further reflection, he couldn’t place this feeling.

“Are you alright?” Nagito asked. He’d leaned in a little, an expression of clear concern etched across his face. “You look troubled.”

That brought back memories too. Hajime pushed a smile onto his face. “Working through it.” Same as everyone. He didn’t have a special right to complain.

Nagito opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, a door slammed, and suddenly the blonde-haired princess came running over to them. “Hajime,” Sonia declared, sounding perfectly graceful despite having just run across the pier in heels. “Nagito.” Her inclusion of the other boy sent a sense of relief through Hajime for some reason. She was trying to uphold her promise too. “Have either of you seen Gundham?”

“I have not,” Nagito said, turning toward her. “Not since last night anyway.”

“I saw him on the second island earlier,” Hajime told Sonia. “By the pharmacy. I thought he might be looking for his hamsters.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure he’ll find them,” Nagito said. “After all, for the Ultimate Breeder, something like that should be easy. Maybe even a game.”
It was probably a testament to Sonia’s diplomatic talent that she didn’t interrupt either of them. Judging by her jittery posture and colored cheeks, it was evident that she was in a hurry. “Thank you both,” she told them, dropping into a light curtsy before running off. Hajime watched her go until she disappeared from sight.

“Odd,” Nagito remarked, “that he didn’t tell her though.”

“Why do you think that?” Hajime asked. “Maybe they just split up to search.”

“Ah. You’re probably right.” Nagito stepped back into his cottage. “Did you still want to come in?”

“Oh, yeah.” Hajime stepped inside. The room hadn’t changed much at all. There was no longer any sign that a…well, maybe transplant wasn’t the right word. There was no sign that an arm had been chopped off in here. No blood anywhere. Oh, right. Nagito liked cleaning, so that made sense. He’d mentioned something about that before, when he was staying with—well.

Otherwise the cottage looked a lot like it had in the simulation. There was no fridge, obviously, and no sign of Monomi’s treasure box either. But the shelves were still stacked with books. He must have been bringing them over from the library. Some of them looked to be in bad shape. The frequently moist sea air was a haven for mold and mildew, after all. A few of the books were laid out on his table, backs up, as though Nagito had been trying to cure them. Two had their covers removed and lay in a pool of sunlight.

“I didn’t know you were a bookbinder,” Hajime remarked.

“I’m not, really.” Nagito closed the door. “Might get lucky though.”

Hajime wasn’t sure if that was a joke or not, so he stayed silent. Only Nagito did too. Why was it that he had an easier time talking to Nagito when he was scolding him? Hajime wondered what that said about himself.

“What about my earlier question?” He tried.

“Earlier question?” Nagito hummed lightly. “What was that?”

Was he playing dumb? “I asked what would help you decide whether you felt lucky right now.”

“Ah, yes. You did say that.” Nagito swung his artificial limb back and forth. It made a quiet whooshing sound. “What do you think, Hinata?”

“Me? How should I know how you feel?” Or think, or act, or other fill-in-the-blank.

“No, I mean, do you feel lucky?” Nagito lowered his arm again, staring at Hajime now. Though he often avoided Hajime’s gaze, he was, Hajime realized, one of the only people who never flinched when looking him in the eye. That red eye. Everyone had gotten better about that recently, but even before, Nagito had been the least bothered by it. Then again, he’d also known Izuru before them, so that explained it.

As to whether or not he felt lucky…Hajime pondered for a moment. “I think so,” he said slowly. “I mean…we’re all still here. We’ve been given a chance to make things right. We took a big step toward that. I know you feel differently about that, but we’re together. We can work something else out.”

“Looks like you had to think about that too though.” Nagito chuckled wryly. “I’m just waiting.”
Waiting? Interesting that he said waiting instead of thinking. His luck again? Waiting to see what happened next—was that it, or was he overthinking this again? No. Last time this had happened, he’d decided he must be overthinking things, only to find out that that was exactly what Nagito thought.

“Your luck,” Hajime said hesitantly, deciding this was the best way to push forward. “Can’t you—”

“Do you remember what luck is, Hinata?” Nagito asked.

“Absolute power,” Hajime answered. To Nagito, anyway.

“You remembered. That’s fantastic! I expected no less from you.” Hajime half-expected to see that sinister, creepy aura emanate from Nagito again, but it didn’t. If anything, he seemed nearly subdued. Only nearly, though.

“No point feeling bad about how the world works.” The pale boy shrugged. “You chose to look toward the future, right? To make your own. It was really something.”

“You don’t believe that,” Hajime said.

“That you chose the future?” An expression of confusion settled across Nagito’s face.

“Not that.” Hajime barely managed to refrain from rolling his eyes. “The first thing. About how the world works. If you just made peace with that, why would you still be helping us try to…do whatever we’re doing?” ‘Fix the world’ didn’t sound any better than ‘redeem ourselves’ as an endpoint to that sentence. Neither was possible. Like they’d told Mitarai, they weren’t doing this for forgiveness.

Nagito just looked blankly at him and said nothing.

Hajime sighed. “Okay then.” He supposed the wall had to be somewhere, given how much progress they’d been making so far. As a result, he was disappointed but not surprised.

The wind picked up outside. It uttered a faint, keening wail as it scraped by the door. The sound might have been eerie if it weren’t a bright, sunny morning outside. As it was, though, Hajime barely even shivered. Nagito was looking out the window now, seemingly lost in thought.

“YOOHOO!” The cry broke through both of their concentration. Ibuki—because of course it would have been Ibuki—knocked on the door. No, not knocked. Pounded, as if it were a drum set.

“Hajime-chan, are you visiting your boyfriend in there?”

Hajime, who’d been about to get up to open the door, stopped. His face felt hot. He peeked back at Nagito, but the other boy had moved so that his back was to him. Swallowing his embarrassment, Hajime stepped forward and opened the door in a single movement. He glared out at Ibuki.

“Saying nonsense like that doesn’t encourage me to open the door.”

“But you did,” Ibuki pointed out. She had one hand up by her forehead and was leaning in, trying to peer deeper into the cottage.

By way of witty retort, Hajime slammed the door in her face.

“OI!” She screeched from outside. “That’s so mean, Hajime-chan!”

He considered ignoring her before relenting and opening the door again. “Feel like trying that
again?”

Ibuki pouted. “Fine. Have you seen Mahiru? We were supposed to meet up to work on planning for the party.”

“Yeah, I think she was heading to the beach with Hiyoko,” Hajime replied.

Ibuki shook her head. “Ibuki checked. There was no one there.”

“No one?” Hajime instinctively glanced out toward the beach, not that he could see it from here. “Are you sure?”

“Mhm mhm.” Ibuki nodded sagely. “Emptier than my last concert.”

That was…pretty sad, actually. But hearing news like that disturbed Hajime. Akane and Nekomaru had been there just a while ago. Maybe they finished their training though. And Hiyoko and Mahiru might have headed to the second island beach instead. After what had happened there last time though, he’d have thought they would have stuck to the first island.

“Maybe they’re on the second island,” Nagito ventured.

Ibuki perked up. “Kyah! You’re so knowledgeable, Nagito-chan! At least when you’re not being creepy.”

“Eh? Creepy?”

“Ibuki will go check now. Bye-onara!” Waving cheerily, she dashed off.

Hajime groaned. “First good nom-nom-nomming, now bye-onara? She’s going to reinvent language itself at this rate.”

“Eh, I think I heard that on a show somewhere before.” Nagito shrugged. “Do you think they’re on the second island?”

Hajime glanced out the window again, trying to quiet the anxiety resurfacing in his chest. “I hope so. But…I don’t know. I have a bad feeling.”

Nagito laughed quietly. “Hey, Hinata.”

“Yeah?”

“You sure you feel lucky?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Responses seemed to say it was up to me, so alright then. :D

As always, feel free to let me know what you liked, what you didn't, what you'd like to see, etc. The ride is just beginning!

You're all the best! <3 Have a lovely day!
Was he sure he felt lucky? In that moment, a question like that ranked highly among the last things Hajime wanted to hear. He stared at Nagito for a few seconds, trying to determine the intent behind that question and how best to respond to it. As usual—regrettably, as usual—he came up blank.

“I’m going to check.” Hajime moved toward the door. “Komaeda, can you—can you round up the others here?” It seemed like an easy enough task. His hesitation came not from a distrust of Nagito but from wondering whether the others would listen to the luckster. Many of them played Uno with him fine, but a nagging part of his mind wondered if that was only because he’d been there. It wasn’t like he could monitor Nagito’s interactions with everyone, even though most of them expected Hajime to act as a—what? A babysitter, basically.

“Sure,” Nagito said. His quiet, breathy reply dragged Hajime back to the present. “If you think that’s best.”

There might have been a note of warning in those words, but Hajime didn’t have time to decode that. He was already out the door and heading toward the bridge. Nothing had happened. Nothing had happened. So why was his heart racing like this? Why did he feel like they were teetering? The air felt heavy, almost solid, the way it did before a thunderstorm. Yet there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

Like Ibuki claimed, the beach was entirely empty. Akane and Nekomaru really had left. He hurried back to the bridge. Ibuki had a fairly sized head start on him, so not seeing her was natural, but it nonetheless increased his discomfort. The bridge shook and swayed beneath him as he ran across it. His breath sounded impossibly loud in his ears. But he didn’t stop running, not until he reached the beach house. Practically leaping over the stone path, he landed hard on the sand. It crunched beneath his feet as he emerged around the side of the house.

Nothing. This beach was empty too.

He stared out over the sand and water. The waves foamed as they slithered in and out, covering and uncovering small portions of the shore. Other than that, everything sat silent and still. Biting his lip, he whirled around and hurried off. The pharmacy. Gundham and Sonia had gone to the pharmacy! Maybe they knew something.

Sand slipped beneath his sneakers, and he nearly fell. Catching himself at the last moment, he took little more than a second to right himself before continuing onward. Even though it couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, it felt like an eternity passed before the pharmacy finally materialized.

Hurrying inside, Hajime’s heart sank to the bottom of his stomach. Empty. Just like it had been when he’d comforted Mikan here. Empty, empty, empty.

The same held true for the library and the diner. Hajime ended up back by the bridge again. He took a moment to double over and catch his breath. Where—where else could they be?

Stopping to catch his breath gave him a moment to think without panicking. Retrieving his cell phone, he dialed Mahiru’s number. Naegi and Kirigiri had given all of them phones, after all. A
few people hadn’t wanted to swap numbers simply because they were all already living together, but Mahiru, Hajime, Fuyuhiko, and Twogami had been adamant. It’s not like it was going to do any harm.

He held the phone close his ear and listened. It rang and rang, but no one answered.


No response from any of them. How could roughly half their group have disappeared just like that? He knew none of them were in their cottages or the hotel because he’d spent most of his time outside Nagito’s cottage. He would have seen them entering. Was there somewhere he’d missed? It wasn’t like the abandoned ranch site suddenly became a huge party scene. And even if there were another place, why wouldn’t any of them answer their phones? No, something was definitely wrong.

He nearly had a heart attack when his phone buzzed in his hand. Eagerly, he looked down at it, but it was just a text from Nagito informing him that he’d gathered the others in the lobby. As he turned to head back across the bridge to join them, his gaze fell on something partially buried in the sand. He moved toward it. Wood, maybe? Prodding the object with his foot revealed that it was a few scraps of bamboo. But where did it come from? There wasn’t any bamboo on the island. And this wasn’t the raw plant either. It looked and felt harder. Again, almost like wood.

It seemed familiar though. He bent down and picked up one of the scraps. Could this be…yes, it had to be. After dealing with the importance of this in an earlier murder case, he couldn’t think of anything else. A part of Peko’s bamboo sword.

He looked around again, but the scene remained unchanged. No one appeared. His anxiety levels spiked higher than his hair. Hajime took another deep breath and sprinted over the bridge, back to Hotel Mirai. The others needed to know about this. He stopped only to verify that the central island was similarly empty. Maybe they’d gone to the park. Maybe he was just being paranoid. Maybe…maybe it wouldn’t be empty.

It was.

Desperation lent him speed, and he once again found himself sprinting. Sand almost seemed to melt before him. Even the ocean waves ceased to be a source of comfort. Their eternal dance instead sounded silencing. No. Hallowing. That was the way to describe the feeling gnawing in his chest.

The ranch was empty too.

Hustling up the hotel steps and into the lobby, the sight of the others slightly dulled Hajime’s worry. They all stared back at him. Teruteru, short and frumpy, kept pushing his fingers together. Twogami, looking as cool and disaffected as ever. Mikan fiddled with the bandages on her wrists. Kazuichi was doing his best to look relaxed, but he was so jittery that it was almost funny. Except that Hajime felt more or less the same way.

Nagito stood near Twogami. He also looked unfazed, and his gaze curiously followed Hajime into the room.

“Well?” Twogami declared after a moment or two of Hajime gasping for air. “I assume something must be happening for you to gather us all like this. Nagito didn’t say much.”
“Aha.” Nagito looked down. “I’m sorry I’m such a useless messenger.”

“D-don’t apologize, Komaeda-kun,” Mikan said, letting go of the bandages. “You just d-did your job.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Hajime said, making a barely controlled effort to contain his exasperation. “Look, something’s going on. I can’t find anyone else—outside of everyone here, I mean. I’ve tried calling them and everything. And I found a few bits of bamboo that I think belonged to Peko’s sword. They’re gone. I don’t know what happened to them. So if anyone heard, or heard, or—just if anyone here knows anything.” He let that thought sail on its own as he eyed everyone in turn.

“They’re gone?” Kazuichi gripped the edges of his beanie. “Crap, crap…what’s going on?”

“M-maybe they’re planning a surprise party,” Teruteru murmured. He’d pulled out a comb and was trailing it through his hair in an effort to hide his shaking fingers. “Yeah, that must be it.”

“That seems unlikely.” Twogami mused. “Who all is missing anyway?”

“He s-said everyone who’s n-not here,” Mikan offered. “So maybe, you know….”

Hajime rattled off the list of names of everyone he’d called.

Twogami nodded. “I thought as much. What about Ryota?”

Mitarai! Hajime took another look around the room. Sure enough, no Mitarai. His gaze landed on Nagito.

The lucky student held up his hands. “Hey, I couldn’t find him. He wasn’t in his room or the hotel. Unless he wanted to avoid me. I suppose that is perfectly understandable.”

Twogami had already retrieved his own phone and was holding it up to his ear. After a few seconds, he shook his head. “Ryota isn’t picking up. That’s not really unusual for him, but after what you’ve told us, I’m worried. When’s the last time anyone saw him?”

Hajime spoke before Nagito could. “I spoke to him just a few minutes ago. He came to my cabin after he talked to Nagito. I thought he might have gone to find you.” Or—had he not? Because Hajime told him not to? Was that…his fault? If he was missing too….

“It was an even narrower time frame for Ibuki,” he added hastily. “Nagito saw her too, yeah? I left maybe two or three minutes after she did. I went to the beach first, sure, but she can’t have been more than five minutes ahead of me. Yet she was nowhere to be found either.”

“I don’t think that would b-be enough t-time to make someone disappear,” Mikan said.

An awkward silence followed her statement as everyone doubtlessly recalled the music venue. Even Hajime couldn’t shake the image of Hiyoko’s body appearing, as if by magic, from within the pillar.

“You’re sure you searched everywhere?” Kazuichi asked, breaking the spell. “I mean, could you have missed a spot? People don’t just vanish.”

“There’s still the matter of their phones,” Teruteru said. “I would always check something buzzing in my pocket. Unless they were ignoring it on purpose.”
Hajime elected to ignore that. “I think so. I guess I didn’t check inside the beach house itself, but there’s no reason for them to…” He trailed off. The others understood it at the same time.

Twogami straightened up. “Let’s go.”

“Eh? I’m sure it’s just a surprise party. Yeah, yeah, that’s it. A surprise party.” Teruteru mumbled. It sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than anyone else.

“I don’t think so.” Hajime said.

“Wh-why?” Teruteru looked nearly as shocked as he had back in his class trial.

“Because Sonia was already planning a party,” Hajime answered. “That wasn’t a secret.”

“It was to me,” Teruteru pouted.

“That’s not surprising,” Kazuichi said. “You’re a little…well…you know.”

“Enough!” Twogami thundered, glaring at them. Both made high-pitched squealing sounds that sounded almost exactly like Mikan’s. The Ultimate Imposter waited for silence before resuming.

“Alright. We’re wasting time. Let’s go. Now.”

Nagito frowned. “I’m not so sure sending everyone is a good—”

“We’re not splitting up,” Hajime said. “Not when people have been disappearing like this. Twogami’s right. We’re going.”

He looked around, challenging anyone to object. No one did. They weren’t moving though, and it took him a few seconds to realize they were waiting for him. Pulling out the same determination he’d found during the end of the killing game felt so much harder now. Perhaps because, at least then, he’d finally learned the truth first. He’d known what to expect. Nonetheless, he had an obligation now.

Hajime nodded. “Follow me.”

He led the procession out of the hotel, back past the pool and cottages, and down toward the bridge leading to the central island. They passed the central park area where the administrative building was supposed to be but wasn’t, both in the simulation and in reality. It made for a nice enough spot when there weren’t mechanical Monobeasts bursting out of statues. But it was still empty. Well, he’d noticed that when he was heading back, so it wasn’t surprising.

It felt like it took them ages to reach the beach house. Hajime knew it couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes. It must have been all the sprinting before that made this one feel slower. They weren’t running, but they hadn’t walked either. The house itself blocked the sea breeze. Hajaime tried to open the roadside door only to find it didn’t move. The alarm bells rang louder in his head. He rammed the door with his shoulder, but it didn’t give.

“Let’s go around?” Mikan suggested.

“We could break it down together,” Kazuichi said.

“No.” Twogami was already moving around the pathway. “Whatever’s in there, we don’t want to make it worse.”

Mikan was a step or two behind him. Kazuichi and Teruteru went as well. Nagito looked at Hajime
before following. Removing his hand from the door, Hajime mastered a violent impulse to kick it and moved around to the beach side.

By the time he got there, everyone except Nagito had already entered. Nagito had crouched down and appeared to be intently studying the sand. The area around the door was a mass of footprints. Hajime could have cursed himself for not paying more attention to the sand when he first checked. After the stampede of people who had just entered the room, making out anything was impossible.

“Something wrong?” He asked.

“I thought,” Nagito said slowly, “that maybe, hmm. I can’t tell.” He straightened up and brushed off his legs. “My fault for not being faster, haha.”

Hajime looked into the beach house. It was dark. Too dark for him to see any of the people who’d just entered. That couldn’t be right. He hadn’t heard anything from them either. Not a sound.

“Shall we?” Nagito asked.

By way of answer, Hajime stepped inside.

He promptly stumbled over Twogami’s body. He managed to catch himself by stepping down hard on his backside. The word ‘sorry’ flashed through his mind, but concern rapidly crowded it out. The impenetrable darkness that had clouded the room from outside lifted. Or…it hadn’t even been there in the first place. Either way, Hajime could see clearly now. It wasn’t just Twogami. Everyone lay motionless on the floor. Not just Kazuichi and the others who’d come here with him—Fuyuhiko, Sonia, even Mitarai—everyone was here. How was that possible? Four people had just entered not even a minute ago. How could they all be—?

Something glittered in the corner of his vision, and he saw what looked like flakes of sand floating through the room. It could have been snow, save for the color and temperature.

“What?” He whispered. At the same moment—

Don’t breathe!

The warning flashed through his mind as his mouth had already opened to utter the question. Involuntarily, his body leapt backwards. Like someone had pulled him back, only without actually touching him. He crashed into whoever was behind him—Nagito, from the startled gasp—and they tumbled to the floor together.

His head spun. The sunlight seemed to fade into liquid lines stretching toward him. His own head felt heavy on his shoulders, and it took him about three seconds to realize it had already lolled down toward his chest. A dim part of his brain realized that something was very, very wrong, but that realization failed to cause any alarm or stimulate any reaction. He was dimly aware of Nagito trying to push him off, but he felt too exhausted to move. Still, he had to try. He knew that much.

It took a herculean effort to roll his body to the side. His own spin did nothing to help him feel less dizzy, but it did let him see the outside better. The streaming light disappeared as a figure appeared in the doorway, dropping down from the roof. He couldn’t make out anything about the person, other than that they looked to be somewhat short and had longish hair, at least, for a male. But he knew it wasn’t someone he’d seen before. The world around him grew brighter and darker at the same time. He tried to open his mouth, push himself up, to do something—anything. But it was useless. He was too tired. He just wanted to sleep.

Slowly, against his will, his eyelids drifted closed, and the darkness took him.
“People who cling to hope and talent really are the weakest. The more you cling to hope, the easier you are to push into despair.”

Junko Enoshima sat on a desk in an empty—no, nearly empty—schoolroom. Rain beat against the windows. Seeing outside proved impossible. The droplets, wet and thick, completely covered the glass. The lights were out as well, leaving the only light as a grayed out wheeze slipping through the rain and windows.

On another desk opposite Enoshima sat Izuru Kamukura. He lifted his head slightly, yet his long hair remained perfectly still. He said nothing.

“Despair can save youuuuu.” Enoshima laughed. “Think about it.”

“…”

“So hope surprised you too. Big whoop. Doesn’t change much really. It’s still so icky.” Enoshima made a face like she’d tasted something overly sour. “Come on. You must find those lines about hope as boring as I do. Look at Makoto. He’s a record that repeats the same thing over and over. Not even a good record either. One of the scratched-up ones that stalls every time you try to listen to a song.”

“…”

“Or is this about crying for your dead waifu?” Enoshima started laughing.

“Not hope,” Izuru spoke softly, his voice almost indistinguishable from the rain.

“No?” The playful edge disappeared from Enoshima’s tone as she leaned in. “Future, then? The future must move forward. That is the truth. But if you have no future, then it’s meaningless, isn’t it? If the world’s hope is different from your hope, well. Sucks to suck. But if the world’s future is different from your future, then you can’t really be a part of the world at all.”

“…”

“Hah! Of course, being part of the world is overrated anyway. All those talentless wannabees dragging everything down. Trying to make themselves great again. Hah—again! As if they ever were. Please. A culture that created the concept of ‘yeet’ or ‘boi’ – you said it yourself. Cultures live and die by the meme, an infection. What’s the fun in being a part of that mess when you can shape it? Or, better, knock it all down?”

“…”

“You can always predict how people with hope will react. But despair—that’s more interesting. Only despair is unpredictable. You might say that future proved itself to be too. But you wouldn’t say that. You know better.” Junko set Monokuma on her lap and gently pet his head. “Future is nothing more than a half-assed stopgap.”

“Junko.” Izuru’s red eyes stayed fixed on her. “You must know better too. You have extreme analytical abilities that allow you to see several steps in advance.”
“It made playing chess soooo boring.” Enoshima yawned. “And I never even learned how the horsey moves.”

“…”

“Oh, come on, Izuru. A hopeful future leaves nothing to work for. A utopia where everyone has everything they want. No war, no poverty, no disease—what could be more boring in that? The world of hope destroys the future. It becomes a lifeless life. A stasis of predetermined harmony. People have everything they need or want, so they need or want nothing. But despair. Despair is limitless. A despairful future is limitless.”

“…”

“I lost to the future because my AI was stuck following the rules of the game while they weren’t. They broke the rules. But the real world is different. You understand that. Don’t you, Izuru?”

“Now you claim you knew they would win?”

Junko laughed. “Tasting the despair of my own meticulous plans falling apart…have you ever felt such pleasure, Izuru?”

“Don’t ask question to which you already know the answers.” To call Izuru’s statement a ‘snap’ would not fit the tone he was using. But it nonetheless carried the distinct impression of one, despite the complete lack of any giveaway or motion in his body.

“Okay, okay.” Enoshima’s Cheshire smile never faded from her lips. “You’re dying, you know.”

“…”

“I’m dead, you know. You in a hurry to join me? Did you miss me that badly? Hah, oh, Izuru, you’re so romantic!”

“…”

“But are you really okay with that?” An icy undercurrent surfaced in Enoshima’s voice. She tilted her head slightly, almost appraisingly. “Despair can save you, you know.” She nodded and tilted her head back. Her whole appearance changed. One eye had vanished from its socket, and a growing bloodstain emerged around her lower stomach. One hand had vanished above the wrist. Her long read nails gleamed on the other as she grinned. “Yes. Only despair can save you.”

…

…

…

A…dream? It sure felt like a dream. It couldn’t have been a memory because Enoshima—from what she said, it sounded like she’d already been dead at that point. So it had to be a dream. He’d had stranger. All those bizarre things Monokuma had been saying. But if that was a dream, then he needed to wake up.

Wake up.

“Hey, are you okay?”

That voice sounded familiar. Real, too. Not in his head. Not a dream like the others. His eyelids
drifted open. Everything blurred and ran together like a shabby, watercolor painting. He blinked once, twice. Somebody was kneeling near him, looking down. Seeing in this dim light proved difficult. Squinting, Hajime could discern pale skin, a greenish coat, a red symbol on his shirt.…

“Komaeda?” Hajime croaked.

“You’re awake! How are you feeling? I’m a little…hm, no. Everyone’s the same. Since we suddenly ended up in this situation.”

“Help me sit,” Hajime said. He felt Nagito move his hands under his shoulder blades and help push him up. He groaned and rolled his neck, letting it crack. “Thanks. What happened?”

“We’re working on that,” another familiar voice snapped. Fuyuhiko. Glancing over, Hajime saw the rest of his classmates sprawled out on the floor or sitting, as he was doing. Floor…but not the beach house. In fact, he had no clue where they were. They were definitely inside somewhere, but there weren’t any windows. Old fluorescent lights gave off a quiet hum, giving the room the distinct appearance of a classroom. But that couldn’t be it. There were no desks or anything. The best way Hajime could think to describe it was like an empty warehouse. A small, empty warehouse. Cold and abandoned. There were large metal shelves bolted into the floor, but they looked rusted over and unsafe.

Speaking of safe.…

“Is everyone okay?” Hajime called to his classmates. He started to get to his feet, but his head spun, and he abandoned the effort, coughing lightly.

“I checked.” Peko said, sitting near Fuyuhiko. “They’re all breathing anyway. But we seem to be locked in.”

“Locked—?” Hajime looked over at the door. Only one way into the room. “Where are we?”

“We don’t know.” Fuyuhiko said impatiently. Sounded like he’d been asked that several times already. “Whatever bastard did this to us is going to be real sorry.”

“Forgive me.” Peko hung her head. “I was caught off-guard, and—”

“Not your fault.” Fuyuhiko spoke quickly, the annoyance fading from his tone.

“Great to see you two can still be all lovey-dovey,” Hiyoko snickered, “but since you haven’t noticed, we’ve been kidnapped.”

Fuyuhiko glared at her. “No one would want to kidnap you. You don’t even look like a kid anymore.”

“But you still do.”

“You little bitch!”

“Enough.” Sonia stuck out her hand commandingly. The gesture somehow seemed less effective with her seated.

“Enough?” Ibuki sat up, stretching. “What’s going on? Where are we?” She rotated her head from side to side. “Ibuki-chan doesn’t recognize this place. It doesn’t look fun.”

“Huh? What?” Akane jumped to her feet. Evidently, being dizzy didn’t bother her. “What
happened? Coach Nidai?"

Nekomaru scratched his nose. “We’ll figure it out. Don’t panic.”

“Hey!” Mahiru called. “Does anyone still have their phone? Mine’s gone.” A brief pause followed her words as people frantically dug into their pockets. Hajime followed suit, but his fingers found nothing except the fabric of his jeans.

“No,” Mitarai said.

“Nope.”

“Uh-uh.”

“It’s gone.” Kazuichi’s face paled. He patted down his jumpsuit furiously. “This is bad.”

Nagito pulled his hand out of his coat pocket. His brow furrowed in confusion. “Me neither.”

“Mhmhmhm.” Gundham folded his arms across his chest. “It is of little consequence. I never needed such a primitive device to communicate.” He made a confident gesture. “Us agents of Hell can speak psychically.”

“Yeah, sure.” Mahiru did not look impressed. “Magic, basically. Got it. Anyone else?” When nobody else spoke, she sighed and brought her hand down to her hip. “So why are we here? Someone went to a lot of trouble to abduct us and take our phones. We can’t call for help now.”

“We can’t?” Akane looked stunned. “Why not?”

“Seriously?” Kazuichi stared at her. “Mahiru just said that our phones were taken. Pay attention.”

“Let me try the door,” Nekomaru declared, maneuvering around everyone to reach it.

“It’s locked,” Peko repeated.

Nekomaru gave her a thumbs-up. “Heh. I’ll break through that easy.” Gripping the handle in both hands, he began turning it wildly. The doorframe seemed to shake, and the metal in the handle complained in a creaky groan. Despite all the rattling, the lock didn’t give.

“Stop!” Hajime urged, a vision of Grape House sprouting in his mind. “Don’t break the handle.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Nekomaru let go and stepped back. “Doors have gotten a lot tougher these days.” He let loose a boisterous laugh. For a second, it actually helped lift everyone’s spirits. But as the laughter faded into nothingness, so did their elation.

The room didn’t fall into silence however. A quiet static buzzed through the air. As one, everyone looked toward its source. A monitor mounted on a wall near the back of the room had switched on and was displaying a blank screen. An icicle spread through Hajime’s body. It couldn’t be. It couldn’t be.

The too-familiar laugh emanated from the monitor. The screen flickered and flashed, and when it finally steadied, there sat the demonic black-and-white bear. Its red eye gleamed out at them and fixed itself directly in line with Hajime’s own.

“Upupupupu. Miss me? Did you miss me? I know you did.” Monokuma looked to be grinning. “I’ve gotten bored of all your do-nothing, wishy washy crap. It’s time to liven things up a little. It’s time for a killing game!”
The reactions were instant.

“What?”

“Killing game?”

“Never again!”

“Monokuma!”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!”

“What’s going on?”

“This can’t be real.”

Those and more—everyone’s initial reactions spiraled into a chaotic, incomprehensible whirlwind. But even through that, one statement broke through to find clarity.

“What the hell are these?” Hiyoko demanded, indicated a small, thin band around her wrist.

Hajime started. In all the panic and confusion, he hadn’t noticed. But—yes. He had one too. Everyone did. It looked like it had a small screen and a few buttons. He pushed a few, but nothing happened.

In the ensuing silence as everyone studied their wristbands, Monokuma spoke again. “If everyone would be so kind as to gather in the dining hall.” A metal click followed those words, and Hajime knew the door had unlocked. Monokuma chuckled and gave a little wave. “Bye-bye!” The screen instantly went dark.

Hajime looked at the others in the room and knew they were all wearing the same horrified expression. He wanted so much for this to be a dream. But he’d had plenty of those before. This felt different. This felt…real. It couldn’t be though. It couldn’t be real. Who would believe that this nonsense could be real? Who could believe this was happening again? It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t!

Mahiru held Hiyoko close and patted her back. Hajime saw that she was shaking. Something similar was happening with Mikan and Kazuichi, both of whom were being comforted by Ibuki.

“We have to go, don’t we?” Peko’s quiet voice sounded in Hajime’s ear. He hadn’t even noticed her approach.

He grit his teeth and dug his fingernails into his palm. It didn’t help quell his shaking. “Yes.” Even saying that much felt almost like a betrayal—a betrayal of his wish for this all to be a dream. A lie.

“Everyone,” Hajime called. And then, “EVERYONE!” The second, louder shout drew all of their attention onto him. He cleared his throat. “Alright. Listen. Going there is the only way to learn about what’s going on. But we’re not going to be participating in a killing game. It’s different this time. We’ve done this before. We know each other now. We trust each other. We know what the outside world is like. There’s nothing they can do to tear us apart. Not as long as we trust each other.” He made sure to make eye contact with everyone individually, one by one. “Right?”

“Yes. Hajime is right,” Sonia beamed, crossing over to him. “We will get out of here together.”

“All of us,” Mahiru agreed. “No way we’re falling for this again.”
Other statements of affirmation made themselves known. Everyone looked determined. That’s right. This wasn’t like before. They wouldn’t turn on each other this time. That atmosphere of suspicion and anxiety and betrayal – that wouldn’t exist anymore. They could do this. They would do this.

Nobody else had moved, so Hajime did. He knew he couldn’t afford to hesitate now, so he strode boldly out of the room, displaying a confidence he didn’t entirely feel. From the cascade of footsteps behind him, the others were tagging along. Good.

They emerged in a gray, drab hallway. The metal floor clanged loudly under their feet with every step. Pipes and loose panels stuck out of the walls. A railing ran along either side of the floor. It almost felt like a catwalk, except there wasn’t anything beneath the floor. There were no windows in here either, but there were several doors. Each of them was locked, save for one near the end of the hall, which opened easily at his touch. Taking a breath, Hajime walked inside.

The dining room looked a little like the one on the Haima. There were a few round tables, each sporting six or seven chairs. A small stage huddled in one corner of the room, draped with curtains on three sides. A figure stood on the stage. They seemed familiar. Short, slightly long hair…yes. Hajime couldn’t be certain, but he suspected that this was the person he saw in the beach house. Now, though, he could make out more details.

The figure was a decidedly feminine-looking male. His cheeks and chin were more on the soft and curved side than the angular one. He looked to be maybe 5’4 or 5’5, and he wore a black, button-up coat that seemed too large for his body. It had white stripes down the sides and sleeves. His pants and shoes were also black, exposing no skin whatsoever. He wore a single black glove on his left hand. His right was tucked into one of the coat pockets. A small pouch hung around his neck.

“Good afternoon,” he said in a light, friendly voice.

Once again, the reaction was instantaneous. Nekomaru, Gundham, Akane, and Peko all menacingly moved forward. Peko’s hand instinctively went toward her back, then stopped, as if she’d realized that her bamboo sword wasn’t there.

“Hang on,” Hajime called to them. “Don’t—”

Another monitor in a corner of the room flickered on, and Monokuma reappeared. “I see you all made it. Nice job not getting lost. Nyahaha!”

“What’s going on here?” Nekomaru demanded, pointing at the stranger. “Explain this!”

“What’s going on here?” Nekomaru demanded, pointing at the stranger. “Explain this!”

“Quickly and truthfully,” Peko added, adjusting her glasses. “You’re outnumbered.”

Hajime frowned. Maybe. But why? Why would he be waiting here for them if he knew he’d be this badly outnumbered? At a glance, he didn’t look particularly strong. But he also couldn’t be controlling Monokuma if he was here with them. So did that mean there was more than one enemy? Maybe the others were watching, ready to do something if things got violent. He couldn’t risk something happening to his friends. They needed information.

The man onstage took his time looking at each of them in turn. Almost exactly like Hajime had just done with the others. This failed to reassure him. Keeping his right hand in his pocket, the man shifted slightly onstage. “Well.” He sighed. “I think you should already know that. Like Monokuma said, it’s a killing game. You’re familiar with it, right? You should be. It’s not as if you Remnants of Despair are new to the concept.”
“You better quit saying such crazy things,” Ibuki declared. “The athletes in our group are ready.”

“And smart enough not to endanger the rest of you, I’m sure,” the man declared.

“Eh? Endanger?” Akane held her hand out to one side. “What do you mean?”

“Tch.” Fuyuhiko had placed his own hand on Peko’s shoulder. “It means if we go after this bastard, then his friend controlling Monokuma can take out the rest of us. Classic tactic.” His words didn’t relax Peko at all, but she didn’t object as he stepped slightly in front of her. “Who are you anyway? What are you trying to do?”

That was the question. Or a question anyway. Hajime could think of several more, but that was as good a place as any to start. Of course, he doubted whether this person would tell them anything.

“Ah, of course.” The man smiled. “We’ll be spending a lot of time together, so we really should do our best to get along. My name is Endirya Kenyano. When I attended Hope’s Peak Academy, I was known as the Ultimate Illusionist.”

“Wait,” Nekomaru called out. “You’re saying you went to Hope’s Peak, just like us?”

“You fiend.” Gundham flipped his scarf back. “Your words are hollow.”

“You’re free to disbelieve if you like.” Endirya sounded mildly disappointed. “Whether you accept the truth or not is ultimately a personal choice.”

“Even if you are from Hope’s Peak, it doesn’t matter.” Mahiru stepped forward. “What is it you want?”

“I told you already. We want—kindly stop sneaking toward the stage, Imposter. You’re not skilled at it.” Hajime looked over to see a red-faced Twogami reluctantly move back. Endirya rested his gloved hand beneath his chin. “As I was saying, my associates and I would like you to play a killing game.”

“That is not going to happen,” Sonia declared. “We have already done that once before. We have no reason to do so again.”


“No,” Peko said.

“Not really,” Teruteru added.

“Who would ever miss a nasty, shit-filled plushy like you?” Hiyoko chortled.

Hajime stood firm. “You called us Remnants of Despair earlier. Are you affiliated with the Future Foundation?”

“You released a video promising to return the world to despair and claiming credit for the near-destruction of the Future Foundation,” Endirya said calmly. “Not the brightest move, unless….”

Hajime raised an eyebrow. “Unless?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Endirya said, flashing a small smile his way. “Nothing for you to worry about at the moment anyway. Besides,” Endirya fondled the pouch around his neck. “If the reports surrounding you are true…you interest me, Hajime Hinata.”
“Ewwww,” Hiyoko stuck out her tongue.

“I can’t say the same,” Hajime returned evenly. “But Sonia’s right. No matter what you do to us, we’re not going to betray and kill each other anymore. We’ve put that behind us and chosen the future.”

“You know you all learned to love me.” Monokuma laughed. “I am your future. Mascots are highly profitable after all. It just wouldn’t be the same without me.”

“It’s not quite the same,” Endirya said. “In a sense, you’re correct. The same rules which governed other killing games won’t force most of you to kill. You have your memories. You know what the outside world is like. We can’t use your desire to escape or your curiosity against you. And as much fun as it would be to stand here and argue about possibilities with you, I think we could all find better things to do. You’ll find the standard Monopads laid out on that table there. I suggest you read over the rules carefully.”

Endirya hopped down from the stage and proceeded calmly toward the door. Akane and Peko both stiffened and glanced at Hajime, who shook his head slightly. Endirya moved through them all. At the exit, he glanced back. “We’ll be unlocking the rest of this floor, so search away. You won’t find a way out. If you choose to live out the rest of your days here, without killing, well…that would be a kind of poetic truth, too. In its own way.”

The moment he left, everyone crowded around Hajime. He didn’t even have time to think before they all began talking.

“What’s going on?”

“Who did that guy think he was?”

“We’re not doing it!”

“OI!” Nekomaru thundered. His voice easily overpowered the other cries. As everyone glanced at him, Nekomaru placed his hand over his chest. “Like I told Hajime before, I’m taking on the role of manager for each and every one of you. We can’t panic now. Athletes who panic right before a big game risk making all kinds of mistakes. Right now, we need to stay calm and come up with a plan together. Right, Hajime?”

“Y-yeah.” Hajime cleared his throat. “Nekomaru’s right.” He sent a wave of silent gratitude toward the Ultimate Team Manager. Nekomaru wasn’t psychic, but he had always displayed a profound ability to tell when people were nonverbally praising him.

“I’ll t-t-try,” Mikan said weakly, rubbing her eyes.

“So what is the plan?” Ibuki asked. She’d probably intended to help cheer everyone up too, but Hajime hadn’t figured one out yet.

“Well, ah…” He said sheepishly. “I, uh—why don’t we take a look at the Monopads first? It’s better for us if we at least know what we’re dealing with.”

“I agree.” Twogami clapped Mitarai on the back. A Mitarai who, Hajime suddenly noticed, looked as white as a sheet. That’s right. Mitarai hadn’t been in their killing game before. But he had been in the one involving the other Future Foundation staff. So he, too, must have known the horror facing them. “We don’t want to give them any excuse to harm us,” Twogami finished.
For a moment, nobody moved. Then Hajime did, and everyone else sprang into action. He picked up his pad and sidestepped the others as they crowded around the table. A strong sense of nausea bubbled up inside him as he clutched the pad. It shook slightly in his grip—no, that was his own hand shaking. His finger slipped over the power button once, twice. He finally succeeded in turning it on.

The screen lit up, displaying a bright background of a sun rising over the ocean. It was a sight he’d seen many times on the island. Seeing it like this felt almost like a mockery. Pressing the home button instantly opened everything. No passcode necessary. There was only a single icon to tap. Labeled rules. Gritting his teeth, he did so. It felt like a trap. This all did. But he didn’t see what else they could do.

A black and white background with Monokuma appeared. Hajime scrolled past it and began reading the rules.

1. When one student kills another, a class trial will be held.
2. A Body Discovery Announcement will sound once three people discover a body.
3. During the class trial, students will argue to determine who the blackened killer is. If a majority votes correctly, then only the blackened will be punished. If the majority votes incorrectly, then everyone except the blackened will be punished.

Well…that didn’t sound too bad. There was no reason for any of them to turn on each other, after all. Nobody needed to escape. Nobody’s memories were stolen. There was no motive to try and survive alone. Surely. But then, their captors must know that. So why structure it this way? Hajime kept reading.

4. The blackened killer may not confess to their crime unless they are already suspected by a majority or circumstance necessitates it.

“Hey, what does this mean?” Kazuichi asked loudly. “Unless circumstance necessitates it? Huh?”

Hajime wasn’t sure how he felt about reading at the same pace as Kazuichi. But before he could say anything, Nagito spoke.

“It means that we can’t exploit that rule in trials by demanding everyone confess and then waiting to see who gets punished.”

The speed with which he reached that conclusion was mildly disturbing. Nagito had been finally starting to improve. What would returning to a killing game do? What effect would that have? Hajime had a sinking feeling that he wasn’t the only one wondering that. Hurriedly he refocused on the Monopad.

5. If the blackened killer confesses at any other point, everyone will be punished.
6. An Observer will join the Remnants of Despair to watch the game. Attacking the Observer, except in self-defense, is subject to disciplinary action.
7. Nighttime hours are from 10pm – 7am. Certain areas will be off-limits during this time. Entering these areas anyway will result in punishment.
8. The killing game ends either when satisfaction is reached or when the traitor is exposed.

Traitor? Again? No. There was no way there could be another traitor. And Hajime didn’t have a clue what ‘satisfaction’ meant. He read on.
9. All participants have wristbands. These wristbands contain both forbidden and compulsory actions. A forbidden action is something that may not be done. A compulsory action is something that must be done. Violating a forbidden or compulsory action will result in a strike. Three strikes will result in punishment.

10. Attempts to remove the wristband or tamper with it in any way, including removing one’s hand, is strictly prohibited. Doing so will result in punishment.

11. Similarly, attempts to tamper with or obstruct the view of the monitors without permission is strictly prohibited. Doing so will result in punishment.

12. More rules may be added at the Mastermind’s discretion.

Silence hung in the room. For most, it wasn’t the kind of silence that indicated reading either. It felt more like the silence that followed reading something dreadful. The kind where the air itself felt colder, almost frozen.

Fuyuhiko broke that silence with the question lingering in all of their minds. “Then…this is real, isn’t it?”

“I won’t believe it, I won’t believe it, I won’t believe it,” Teruteru repeated over and over, like that was a blessing to ward off evil.

“What the hell?” Kazuichi cried.

“Have we not suffered enough?” Sonia teared up. Gundham crossed over to her wordlessly.

“If anyone even thinks of killing, I’m going to bop you on the head,” Hiyoko threatened. “I can actually reach it now.”

“No one had better think of killing,” Peko agreed. “Or else.”

“What…? Mitarai was so pale that he looked more like a ghost than a living person. “What is this…?”

“Hey, guys.” Ibuki said, pushing her two pointer fingers together. “Come on now. Hey. Hey! Hey!” Her shout was nearly as loud as Nekomaru’s. “It’s different this time. We should try to find a way out of here, yeah? Ibuki-chan can even do a little song to encourage you. I call it, ‘Put Those Balls in Your Mouth: Eating the Hailstones Life Throws at You.’”

That name—

“We’ll take the encouragement,” Gundham growled, “but a bard’s whims are not needed here.”

“Agreed,” Kazuichi grumbled.

“No one’s going to kill,” Hajime said firmly. Everybody seemed to be holding together reasonably well. He decided to take that as a testament to their resilience. Their unity, gained from having done this before. “Now let’s all work together to find a way out of here. We’re not in the virtual world this time. This is the real world, so there must be a way out.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Mahiru forced a smile onto her face. “Come on, everyone. If we despair, they win.”

“Big Sis Mahiru’s right!” Hiyoko cried, holding her fists out eagerly. “Any crying now would be a
bad thing! I’ll bop you on the head if you do. Unless you’re Mikan—I’ll just squish her.”

“Heeeeh?” Mikan shook her head frantically. “No, no, I won’t! I—waah! I’m sorry!”

She was…already crying though. Hajime elected to avoid pointing this out.

“Before we go off exploring,” Twogami interjected, “we should take a look at these.” He held up his wrist so everyone could see the band there. “If what these rules about forbidden and compulsory actions is true, then we wouldn’t want to set any off accidentally.”

“Oh. That’s a good point.” Mitarai agreed. “It’s like back in the tower. It would be bad if…if that happened.”

Hajime checked his band again. Nothing. He pressed the buttons again. Still nothing. From the expressions on the others’ faces, they weren’t getting anything either.

“Are the stupid things broken already?” Kazuichi asked.

“Tch. Bastards can’t even get their game working right,” Fuyuhiko snorted.

“That’s g-good for us, though, yeah?” Mikan said.

“Hold on,” Hajime said, lowering his arm. “It’s possible they just haven’t activated them yet.”

“What are you saying?” Hiyoko stuck out her lower lip. “Do you want this game to happen?”

“Don’t be silly!” Hajime snapped. “I’m just saying that we shouldn’t do anything hasty.”

“Hajime is probably right,” Sonia said sadly. “As much as I would like to believe this is not real, it is better for us to be careful.”

“The Dark Queen speaks well,” Gundham mused.

“Alright then!” Ibuki declared. “With that settled, let’s get exploring!”

She linked arms with both Mikan and Kazuichi and more-or-less dragged them from the room over their protests. The others began filing out to explore as well. That was good. Having something to do would distract everyone. Keep them busy from thinking too much about their situation and panicking. Nobody had even brought up one of the things which worried Hajime the most—the rule about the traitor. He’d already told himself it wasn’t possible, and it wasn’t. It couldn’t be. No one would betray them after everything they’d all been through.

Now he was the one thinking too much. Giving his head a light shake, Hajime decided to help the others explore. Forgoing the hallway for now, he entered a smaller door off to one side of the dining hall. It led into a small but crowded kitchen. A large counter sat in the center of the room, nearly dividing it in two. It stretched from the door Hajime had just entered through almost all the way to the opposite wall. A stainless steel fridge stuck out on his side of the counter; a series of cabinets and a gas stove were on the other side. Teruteru and Akane—of course—were both in here as well.

“It’s not the finest I’ve ever seen,” Teruteru was saying, “but I think I could work with this. A lot of these appliances are actually rather high-end. A chef could do well in here, hmmmhm.”

“Fridge is well-stocked too!” Akane announced cheerfully, swinging the doors shut. “You oughta cook up something yummy, lil’ chef dude!”
“You think so?” Teruteru pulled out his comb and ran it through his hair. “I may have a package for you right now, if you’re interested.”

“Hmm.” Akane sniffed the air and made a face. “That smells fishy.”

“I can work with fish.” Teruteru beamed. “It’s a prized staple in many cuisines around the world. I couldn’t call myself a chef if I couldn’t work with something so basic. It’s pretty common in soups and stews, but I can—”

“Mmm, as long as I can eat it,” Akane said. She’d stuck her finger in her ear. “I’ll need my strength if I’m gonna help everyone bust outta here.”

That was…surprisingly sweet, actually. Of course Akane would think of combat as a way to help everyone. She’d done the same thing on the island by attacking Monokuma. But…she wouldn’t actually try that again, would she?

Hajime resolved to talk with her later. For now, though, she and Teruteru had the kitchen covered. He returned to the dining room and passed through to the hallway. He didn’t want to return to the empty room they’d all woken up in, so he went for the door immediately on his right. Locked. He tried it again to make sure. Yup. That door was definitely locked. Stifling a sigh, he moved down the hallway and tried another one.

This time, the room led into…Hajime paused. Actually he wasn’t sure. A children’s hall, maybe? The walls were painted. Hills and trees and sky and clouds—as he walked along, Hajime realized that the seasons changed from spring to summer to autumn. The ground beneath him wasn’t like the harsh metal floor outside. It was soft and spongy, almost like turf. He pressed down on it experimentally. It gave without a sound.

“It’s great!” Mahiru emerged from around a corner up ahead. “Did you—oh, hey, Hajime.”

“Eh? Big Bro Hajime’s here?” Hiyoko strolled out from that same corner. “He is! Hajime! Over here! Big Sis and I made a snowman!”

“You—what?” He couldn’t have heard that correctly.

“There’s a snow room over here,” Mahiru pointed.

Hajime walked forward. Around the corner was another room. Snow coated the ground. He shivered, regretting—not for the first time—that he didn’t have any long-sleeved clothes. The room was circular and rather small—Hajime estimated its circumference was only slightly larger than Strawberry Tower’s had been. Sure enough, a small snowman stood in the center of the room. It had no arms or nose yet, but it was still unmistakably a snowman. He had the distinct impression Mahiru had taken a picture of it.

Where was the snow coming from though…? He looked up. No clouds, obviously. The ceiling itself wasn’t even intact. There were large gaps in the panels there. And—ah, snow machines. He spotted at least two through the empty spaces. The machines gave off a low but constant hum.

There didn’t seem to be anything else in here. Hajime turned and left the room. He passed Mahiru and Hiyoko in the hallway. Hiyoko was poking at a painting of a bridge on the wall while Mahiru readied her camera. Interesting that they hadn’t bothered to take that away from her. Then again, a camera couldn’t contact the outside world anyway….

A camera! Right! Kirigiri had mentioned she’d put one in for their next shipment. So if they’d be getting that soon…somebody would notice, right? When they came to deliver everything and no
one appeared to meet them, they’d realize something was wrong. All they had to do was hold out for a little bit.

Somewhat cheered by this thought, Hajime returned to the main hallway. There were still two rooms on the opposite side of the hall, and then the one opposite the dining room which led back to the storage area they’d woken up in. He picked the one closer to the dining hall and emerged in another long hallway. This one had several doors on either side. Each one had a picture of one of them on it.

“I, um, I think these are s-supposed to be our dorms,” Mikan stuttered. “I l-looked inside mine because the p-picture they drew was nice. They didn’t g-give me big hips or a p-p-pig nose or anything.” She stood outside of her own room, nervously tugging on her apron. “M-maybe if I take off my clothes, they’ll l-let us….”

“I don’t think you should do that,” Hajime said quickly. Poor Mikan. Hopefully this killing game wouldn’t revert her to how she’d been on the island. Or how she’d been…before. “Hey, what happened to—?”

As if in response to the question, another door opened, and Ibuki bounded out. “Ugh! Hajime-chan!” She hurried over to him. “Everything is so gray here! Give Ibuki a crayon. She’ll bring some life to this place.”

“Ah. Um.” Hajime blinked. “There’s a painted room on the other—”

“WOO-HOO!” Ibuki fist-bumped the air. “Painted with music and fire!”

“What? No, I mean actually p—”

It was too late. Ibuki had already burst into another room and returned a few seconds later with Kazuichi in tow.

His eyes bulged in his skull as he reached out. “Hajime, help!”

By the time Hajime had even lifted his hand, Ibuki had already grabbed Mikan and steered them both down the hall. Poor Kazuichi too. At least Ibuki was an unending force of optimism, even now. In a way, it really was amazing. Even being killed hadn’t shaken her at all. It was easy to dismiss Ibuki sometimes. She could also be difficult to understand. But she was always cheery, and that was valuable in and of itself. Especially in this kind of environment.

Aside from all of the dorm rooms lining the hall, another door stood at the end. Peeking inside, Hajime saw that it opened into a communal lounge area. Couches, a wall-mounted TV, even a pool table. As if anyone were going to be in here relaxing. Although, on second thought, he took that back. People couldn’t manage if they were constantly in a high-stakes situation with no outlet. In that sense, this room could be really useful.

Tucked away in a corner of the room, Hajime spotted a small cabinet lined with board games and decks of cards. For a brief moment, he recalled sitting around the poolside playing Uno with his friends. That was just yesterday, wasn’t it? How did this happen? How could this have happened? It couldn’t….

“Oi. Hajime.”

The voice pulled him out of his thoughts. Glancing up, he saw Fuyuhiko and Peko approaching him from the other end of the room. Fuyuhiko had his hands in his pockets. It still felt odd seeing him with only one eye, but then again, Hajime wasn’t sure he had much room to talk.
“You’ve got that dumb look on your face,” Fuyuhiko observed. “Come on. Snap out of it. We need you here. Well, I don’t. I’ll be fine. But, you know, the others look up to you.”

“You are quite right, young master.” Peko added, closing her eyes and holding her hand near her heart.

“For fuck’s sake. Still?” Fuyuhiko rolled his eye. “I’m tired of telling you, so do whatever you want.”

“Yes,” Peko said slowly.

Hajime began feeling like he might have walked in on something. But Fuyuhiko spoke before he could excuse himself.

“Anyway.” The young yakuza pointed at him. “Come on, Hajime. I can’t keep doing all the work for you.”

You…haven’t been doing any work for me, Hajime thought to himself. Unless—Fuyuhiko was trying to be kind? Motivate him? “Yeah, yeah, I guess you’re right.” Hajime said.

“Tch. Guess.” Fuyuhiko glanced off to one side. “We’re all so slow to change. Almost seems like karma that this is happening again, huh?”

“Eh?” Wh-what did that mean?

“Easy there.” Now Fuyuhiko was the one who closed his eye, sighing. “I’m just saying, you know? We gotta be more careful than we were last time. And we have to be better, too. No more of this wishy-washy bullshit.”

“Well.” Hajime scratched at his cheek. “I guess you—no. You’re right. Sorry.” He took a deep breath and slapped a smile onto his face. “It won’t be long. We’ll all make it out of this together. We already chose a better future once. We can do it again.”


“Heh. Got it.”

That felt like the moment when they should have high-fisted or bro-fisted. But that thought was a little pain-inducing in and of itself, and besides, Fuyuhiko had already brushed past him. He and Peko moved back into the hallway, and after another cursory glance around the room, Hajime followed.

Fuyuhiko and Peko slipped into Fuyuhiko’s dorm room. Hajime paused outside his own, contemplating searching there. After a moment, he opened it and stepped inside. The room was dark—his hand rose automatically to find a switch. Even after flipping it, the room remained fairly dim. The layout of the room reminded him of the accommodations on the Haima, but the general quality was…not. The room was narrow. Cramped. The ceiling hung low and bulged downward in places. It was neither dusty nor dirty, but it was sparse. A bed. A small dresser. No bathroom or windows or—wait. Come to think of it, he hadn’t seen any windows in any of the other rooms either. What was up with that?

The drawers in the dresser were empty. At least the cottages had made more than a token effort at being livable…although given that their purpose was to basically be an island getaway for everyone to grow closer together, that made sense. This setup felt almost like a prison. A
punishment.

Maybe they deserved that. But no one deserved to be stuck in a killing game.

No. Even admitting that something like this could be a kind of redemption was giving in. That thought was dangerous. Especially if people began believing it. There was—there had to be no way that kind of thing could be possible.

As he opened his door to leave, Hajime noticed that there was no lock on the inside. Or the outside for that matter. A spike of concern impaled him before passing through. It didn’t matter because nobody would kill. They’d already decided that. They would figure out what was going on and escape from here.

Hajime left his room and returned to the main hall. One more room remained before he had to return to that empty storage area. Maybe it was the bathroom? He hadn’t seen one anywhere else. Sure, they wouldn’t have a nice bathhouse, but that hadn’t existed on the island either. He was almost surprised at how much he missed those, really. Bathhouses and even baths…maybe it was just hard to think of the world as falling apart when you were relaxing in the warm water. Or maybe it wasn’t. Either way.

When he opened the door, though, he saw it wasn’t a bathroom. It was a small gym. A water cooler and towel rack occupied two corners of the room. An exercise bike, a set of barbells, and two treadmills filled up even more space. The remainder of the room was occupied by two people Hajime had not expected to see together. Sonia and Mitarai.

“This horror genre,” Sonia was in the middle of saying, “I would like to see it. You must have studied many of these anime after all. I thought maybe you could recommend some for once we get out of here.”

Mitarai had glanced up at Hajime when he entered. Now he went back to looking around at the exercise equipment as if he’d never seen anything like it before. “You really think we’ll get out of here?”

Ouch. Apparently not everyone had been convinced. Well, Hajime was doing his best to convince himself still, so….

“Of course.” Sonia smiled, holding up her arm. “Hajime inspired us all to face Enoshima before. Him and Gundham and everyone. We got out of a mess like this before, so we will again. Don’t you think so?” She asked, directing her attention to Hajime.


“You’ve both said that,” Mitarai said quietly. “But I wasn’t part of that.”

“Maybe not,” Sonia allowed, “but you ended up trapped in a killing game, too. So you are just as much a part of this as the rest of us.”

Mitarai fiddled with his wristband. “I guess.”

“You should have more confidence in yourself, Ryota.” Sonia declared. An easy thing for the Ultimate Princess to say. Though that was something all of them were working on. “And in us,” Sonia continued.

“The Imposter once said to place the most trust in sugar and carbs,” Mitarai said. Who was he, Akane?
Sonia chuckled. “I do not know about that. Back in my country, I—”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?!” A bellowing voice boomed through the air. Everyone looked around wildly for its source. “DO YOU UNDERSTAND HOW IMPORTANT SHITTING IS?”

“It’s coming from over here!” Hajime threw open the door and hurried into the hall. Mitarai and Sonia followed, and the three of them rushed back into the empty storage room. Only it was no longer empty. Two boxes had been set up on the metal shelves. Of more immediate concern, though, was the group of people standing there. Including one of their captors.

Endirya pushed another large box onto one of the shelves and turned back to face everyone. His breathing had definitely gotten harder. “Whew.” He wiped his forehead with the back of his gloved hand. “Look, I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t make a bathroom appear out of thin air.”

Nekomaru, Gundham, Twogami, and Nagito were there as well. The last three glanced up as Hajime, Sonia, and Mitarai entered. Nekomaru, though, didn’t seem to notice. He stepped toward Endirya.

“Shitting is one of life’s most essential functions,” he declared. “You can’t just take that away from us!”

“If you want access to a bathroom, then hurry up and start the killing game already.” Endirya shrugged. “I think that would be a rather sad motive, but people do differ in their desires after all.”

“Wait.” Hajime said. His brain raced as he spoke. “You’re saying there’s not a bathroom anywhere? What are we supposed to do then?”

“Be careful with how much water you decide to drink?” Endirya suggested. “Or designate a spot to use, perhaps.”

“But you are stuck down here with us too, are you not?” Sonia looked horrified.

“Anway.” Endirya bent to pick up the last box. “If you’re done complaining about the bathrooms, is there anything else I can help with?”

“Those boxes.” Twogami pushed up his glasses. “What’s that about?”

“Just setting up a few supplies. Mostly to compensate. You’ll have the opportunity to see them once I’ve finished unpacking.”

“Perhaps they contain the darkest secrets of the netherworld.” Gundham had moved over to Sonia’s side. “Such things were not meant for mortal eyes. They speak of peril.”

Hajime studied the boxes. They weren’t gigantic—or at least, they looked rather small compared to the empty space still on the shelves. However, they were still big enough to contain all sorts of weapons.

“What about our wristbands?” Mitarai asked shrilly, holding up his arm. “These aren’t on yet, right? So that means the killing game hasn’t started yet.”

“Oh.” Endirya’s lavender eyes drifted over each of them in turn. “No, they’re on.”

“It can’t be,” Mitarai gasped. “How are we supposed to see our forbidden actions?”

“You could try things to trigger them.” Endirya ran his gloved hand through his hair. “Or, again, you could start the killing game.”

“That is not fair.” Sonia stepped forward. “Can you not simply tell us?”

“I will tell the first three people who ask.” Endirya turned his piercing gaze on Sonia. He sounded almost clinical about all of this—as if this were simply the way things had always been. “And three people have already asked.”

“Who?” Twogami demanded.

Endirya said nothing.

Three people had already asked? Was that really true? Maybe if he’d come here first, he could have known.

“What about the compulsory actions?” Nagito asked. His voice was practically a low hum. Hajime shot him a quick glance, but Nagito wasn’t looking at him. “We would need to know what those are. Otherwise we couldn’t possibly do them. No?”

Before Endirya could reply, a panel in the ceiling opened, and Monokuma dropped through.

That was—that was the only way Hajime could describe it. Had he just been sitting up there, waiting? Granted, this wasn’t a simulation, so he couldn’t just appear out of thin air, but even so.

“Monokuma appears!” The bear declared.

“So you really are back.” Twogami growled. “I was hoping you might have been just an image or recording.”

“Nope.” Monokuma wore his usual sinister grin. “I told you before. Mascots are essential. Besides, I was the Despair Headmaster of Hope’s Peak Academy. What kind of irresponsible headmaster would go and abandon his students? He’d be a real bum, I tell ya.”

“But we have already graduated,” Sonia said, frowning.

“That’s not the issue!” Nekomaru stomped toward Monokuma.

“Nekomaru, don’t—” Hajime began. It was already too late.

The Ultimate Team Manager grabbed the smaller bear and lifted him off the ground. “Who are you?” He roared. “Who’s controlling you? Come out and face us like a man! Don’t just send out this lackey!” He waved Monokuma in Endirya’s general direction. “I’m not going to let you get away with hurting anyone anymore.”

“Argh!” Monokuma wailed. “You’re hurting meeee!”

“Then you’d better do it quickly!”

“Nekomaru, please wait!” Sonia rushed toward him. “Attacking Monokuma is against the rules!”

“It’s not, actually,” Nagito said quietly.

“What do you mean?” Mitarai pulled out his Monopad. “It has to be, right? It…oh.”
Endirya looked at them and then up, as if he could see through the ceiling. “Oops.” He moved over toward a corner of the room where a small camera sat mounted on the wall. “Hey…you should probably add it. It would be really annoying if they kept destroying Monokuma.”

The disinterest he showed in Nekomaru swinging the object in question around like a ball was remarkable. For his part, Monokuma kept up a scream that was so over-the-top that Hajime found himself stumped as to whether it was real or fake. As to—what? Something beeped in his pocket. His Monopad. Hajime pulled it out.

13. Attacking Monokuma is prohibited.

“Now it’s against the rules,” Twogami observed. For Nekomaru’s sake, maybe? The large male slowly lowered Monokuma back to the ground.

“Such cowardice.” Gundham sneered. “Rules are a poor shield. Even Hajime was able to overcome them.” Was that an insult or a compliment? Hajime couldn’t tell.

“Whew, that was close.” Monokuma wiped his forehead. “I almost threw up my fish.”

“How can a stuffed animal eat fish?” Sonia asked.

“Anyway,” Nagito said, “what brought you out, Monokuma? Didn’t you want something?”

“Oh, yes!” Monokuma waddled over to the center of the room. “Those compulsory actions you were talking about. You’ll be informed of those, of course. The bands will buzz and heat up, and the message will display on the screen. We won’t ask you to do something impossible, so don’t worry about that. It just wouldn’t be fair that way. And we must be fair, mustn’t we?”

“Why?” Nagito tilted his head. “Are you showing this to someone again?”


In the silence that followed his non-answer, Monokuma flounced over to the door. “Don’t forget that we’ll be watching you.” He chuckled. “I’m such a good parent to watch my naughty little kids.” With that, he left.

Nekomaru grit his teeth. “What does he want?”

“I don’t know,” Mitarai said slowly.

“I’m not sure how much clearer we can be about that point.” Endirya said.

“But why,” Hajime hissed, stressing the last word. “Why are you so intent that we kill each other? If this is about us being Remnants of Despair, which we’re not, then why not just kill us all? Why go through all the trouble of bringing us to—wherever we are?” It was only in the middle of his question that he realized he had no clue where they were. There hadn’t been a place like this on the island. And there weren’t any other islands near Jabberwock, were there? He’d thought it might be a boat, but there wasn’t any hum from the engines or slight rocking from the movement.

“I don’t think you really expected me to answer that.” Endirya had a faint note of amusement in his voice. “You might as well get back to searching for a way out. You won’t find one. Not on this floor, anyway.”

“Not on this floor?” Nekomaru scratched the side of his head. “What does that mean?”
“So you are saying there is a way out?” Sonia pressed her hands together.

“Wearily the night marches toward the dawn,” Gundham declared. “But always, it marches nonetheless. There is no way to stop life.”

“That would be interesting,” Endirya said neutrally. “Wouldn’t it?”

Twogami crossed his arms. “It seems like you aren’t going to tell us anything useful.”

“If that’s how you feel.” Endirya opened one of the boxes and removed a few tools. A hammer, a few screwdrivers, a flashlight—that sort of thing. He began arranging them on one of the shelves, seemingly done with the conversation.

“We cannot give up,” Sonia said. “We will keep searching. Gundham?”

“As you wish.” The pair drifted out of the room together.

“That’s the spirit.” Nekomaru dusted down his black coat. “That Gundham is smarter than he looks. He understands very well. You can’t win a game if you’re benched the whole time.” With that, he followed them out.

Game, though? This was hardly a game, Hajime thought. They’d all risked everything to stop this so-called game before, and now….

“Say.” The Imposter’s voice dragged Hajime from his own thoughts. He was pushing up his glasses with one hand and holding Mitarai’s shoulder with the other. “You’re awfully secretive.”

That seemed like a strange comment coming from him of all people. Endirya apparently shared Hajime’s sentiment. He raised his eyebrows. “So are you. All of you, really. So much you still haven’t revealed to each other. Or….” It might just been Hajime’s imagination, but he thought Endirya’s gaze lingered on him slightly longer than on the others. “Things you haven’t accepted about each other.”

“Humph.” Twogami smirked. “As long as things look right, is that it?”

Endirya’s mouth became a thin, hard line. He turned around rigidly and went back to unloading the boxes.

“Come, Mitarai.” Twogami steered the smaller boy from the room, giving Hajime a brief nod as he passed. Despite having kept that form, he no longer acted much like Togami—a fact for which Hajime felt grateful. Still. What was that about?

He glanced at Nagito, but the other’s expression remained as inscrutable as ever. Then he smiled. “Shall we get going then, Hinata? You’ve already explored the rest of the rooms, right?”

“Right,” Hajime answered. He stood there a few seconds longer before turning on his heel and walking out of the room. From the echoing footsteps on the metal floor, he knew Nagito had followed him. Once back in the main hallway, he took a deep breath before facing Nagito. The other boy had both hands tucked into his coat pockets. He almost looked like he was expecting a scolding. Like a puppy that knew it had done something wrong. Not that Nagito could ever be called a puppy.

This wasn’t a healthy train of thought. Hajime gave his head a slight shake. “Lucky.” The word dropped like a stone from his lips. It didn’t crash to the floor, but from the silence that followed it, it may as well have. Nagito didn’t say anything as the seconds dragged on.
Stifling a sigh, Hajime continued. “Would you be able to answer that now?”

“Is this a test?” Nagito removed his hands from his pockets to fold his arms across his chest. “You sound almost suspicious, Hinata.”

“....”

“Frankly, I couldn’t.” Nagito relented.

At least it was an answer. Even if it didn’t really make sense. “What are you saying?” Hajime asked. “How could this situation be anything but bad luck?”

This time, it was Nagito who kept silent.

“Forget it.” Hajime crossed back toward the door leading to the dorm hall. Setting his hand on the handle, he glanced back at Nagito. “Just don’t do anything crazy, alright?”

The flicker of a smile crossed Nagito’s lips. But he didn’t say anything, so Hajime couldn’t either. For a moment, they observed each other across the metal hallway.

Then the doorknob twisted in Hajime’s hand, and he stepped into the next hallway, leaving Nagito on his own. He wouldn’t kill. He wouldn’t set up a kill. Things would be different this time.

They had to be.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks so much for reading!

I decided to go with a few OCs for this story instead. Hopefully that’s not too distracting. Most of you left it up to me, and I do have some interesting plans that they fit better with. Especially with the direction Killer Killer ended up going in. As I promised in a comment, no OC x Canon ships or anything like that though. :)

This will be the last update before 2018. Chapters might slow down slightly now, but I’m still dedicated to getting them out! I want to thank all of you for supporting this work. Seeing your comments always makes me so happy. Thank you.
Stopping outside Fuyuhiko’s door, Hajime took a breath to compose himself. He undid and redid his tie, pulling the knot tightly up his chest. Not enough. He unwrapped it and did it again. By the fourth try, he felt like he’d finally strangled some of the anxiety in his heart. He lifted his hand to knock, but before he could, the door opened.

Fuyuhiko stood there, adjusting his pinstripe suit. “No matter how many times you adjust that tie, I’m not going to fuckin’ date you.”

“Eh?” Hajime recoiled. “You could see that?”

“There’s a peephole.” Fuyuhiko said. “They’re on all the doors. And you didn’t even notice that?”

“Well, ah….” That was—well—no, perhaps he hadn’t. “Were you just staring out the peephole, waiting for someone to walk by?”

Fuyuhiko rolled his eyes. “Actually—”

“That was my doing.” Peko appeared over Fuyuhiko’s shoulder. “I saw a shadow pass by the door, and I thought it wise to maintain a vigil. Just in case. I merely meant to protect the young master.”

“I’m not a kid,” Fuyuhiko growled. “We’ve been over this.”

“I suppose we have,” Peko allowed, her tone softening slightly.

“Tch.” Fuyuhiko folded his arms and studied Hajime. “Anyway, you want everyone to meet up, yeah? We’re going to go over anything useful we might have found—and didn’t find. Just like back then.”

“Well…somewhere like that,” Hajime admitted. He refused to let the awkwardness of this moment deter him.

“Most of us came to the same conclusion, I’m sure.” Peko said. “Fuyuhiko and I will round up anyone in their rooms, if you want to look for the others elsewhere.”

“Thanks.”

Leaving them to it, Hajime walked back into the other hallway. Nagito had disappeared. He couldn’t be—no, that was fine. Fine. This wasn’t like the island. He’d already decided that. Now they—

“Hinata-kun?” As if summoned even by thinking about him, the door to the snow room hallway had opened. Nagito stepped out, followed by Ibuki, Kazuichi, and Mikan. “Is something wrong? You look troubled.”

“No, no.” Hajime said quickly. “I thought I told you to drop the honorific.”

“Oh. Yes. Haha, sorry.” Nagito lowered his gaze. “Anyway, I thought you would want to talk to everyone.”
“So he told us to go to the café!” Ibuki interjected. “Which is good anyway because I was starting to get hungry-mungry! And I told you what happens when I get hungry, Hajime-chan. I get excited! My excitement levels go totes crazy! It’s like, not even Van Gogh can keep up with me!”

“I’m not sure he would….” Nagito trailed off.

“Alright, alright, I get it,” Hajime said, despite not really getting it at all. “Yeah, you’re right. Ah… thanks, Komaeda.” Words that still felt strange in his mouth. Not wrong, per se. But definitely strange.

“Hajime.” Kazuichi moaned. “Help. Please. I thought that ride at the 4th island’s amusement park was bad. I was wrong.” An unhealthy blue pallor rose through his cheeks. “I was wrong,” he whispered again.

“Mmmmmm.” Mikan seemed torn between nodding and shaking her head. “It’s not that bad though. Ah, not that I’m trying to say you’re w-wrong or anything!”

Hajime just shook his head. What was he going to do with these three? “Ibuki, maybe take it a little easier on them, yeah?”

“Nope!” Ibuki beamed. “Soda bottles are fun to shake!”

She dragged Kazuichi and Mikan into the cafeteria. The door closed behind the trio, cutting off the screams.

For the second time in what had to be less than five minutes, Hajime found himself alone with Nagito. “Did you tell anyone else?” He asked.

“Of course.” Nagito said. “I saw Saionji and Koizumi in the gym and told them as well.”

Hajime nodded. “Come on then.” He led the way into the dining room, Nagito at his heels. Most of their group had already assembled there. They glanced over when the door opened.

“Oh? Are we starting?” Akane asked, jumping off the table she’d been sitting on.

“Not yet,” Hajime answered. “We’re still waiting on a few people.”

“Kyeh. Slowpokes.” Hiyoko said. “Even the trashy skank made it faster than them.”

“Enough.” Twogami got up. His chair scraped along the floor as he pushed it back. “Hiyoko, you don’t even look like a child anymore. And Mikan… just, enough.” He cast a glance toward the camera mounted in the corner of the room. “Don’t forget that they’re watching us.”

“There are a lot of cameras,” Mahiru agreed. “There was even one in that snow room.”

“Are they broadcasting this again?” Kazuichi asked, gripping his beanie.

“Broadcasting what?” Asked Sonia. Hajime glanced over his shoulder to see her stepping into the room. Fuyuhiko, Peko, and all the others filed in behind her.

“This!” Kazuichi gestured wildly at nothing. “This whole—thing!”

“I think it’s more likely that they’re using the cameras to watch us,” Mitarai said. “We were on Jabberwock Island, and we can’t have gone that far. Even if they had another island or base set up
nearby, we’d still be out in the middle of the Pacific.”

“Oh. That’s true.” Nekomaru agreed.

“We’re all here now,” Twogami said. “So? Tell me what you found.”

“I did not see a way out,” Sonia answered, holding her arms low in disappointment. “Just a small gym area. I did not see any windows or exit doors.”

“Lots of weights though,” Mitarai said. “I think they even had a medicine ball and different dumbbells and such. It’s a little…ugh.” He trailed off with a shudder.

“Humph.” Nekomaru scratched his nose. “Nonetheless, training your body is essential for training your mind. Everyone should set up a schedule for that. We might be here for a while, but that’s no excuse for idleness.”

“Right.” Peko said. “Anyway. They have dorm rooms set up for all of us. There is also a lounge area for recreation. It seems they expect us to relax here. Though that is, of course, impossible.” Again her hand drifted toward her back, where the empty sword bag remained.

“Ah! A gym would give that impression too!” Mahiru realized.

Hiyoko snickered. “Maybe to big lugs like Nekomaru.”

“Obviously there was that storage room we all woke up in,” Nagito said quietly. His voice was barely more than a low hum in his throat. “So I’m sure you all saw that. As well as the new equipment they were placing in there.”

“New equipment?” Akane stuck a finger in her ear. “What are ya talking about?”

“We should probably get a catalog of that once it’s all set up,” Nagito continued.

“Tch…I guess.” Fuyuhiko didn’t look happy to be agreeing with Nagito.

“Taking stock of one’s resources is indeed valuable.” Gundham growled. “For a cursed child, you speak well.”

“Cursed child?” Nagito blinked.


“Hey, who are you calling an idiot?” Mahiru jabbed her finger at him. “We know who you are now, so why are you acting like Togami all over again?”

“Yah! The peasants are fighting!” Hiyoko threw her arms into the air.

Hajime wrestled back a strong desire to face-palm. The dysfunction wasn’t the same as before though. Back then, they hadn’t really known whether they could trust each other. Now, though, their arguments came across more like friendly disagreements. That was what he wanted to believe, anyway. So he would. Simple as that.

“Why do you say th—?” Kazuichi asked.

“CHAAA!” Ibuki interrupted. “Just like Peko-chan said, Ibuki and the others saw the dorm rooms too. They’re really small. You could barely swing a piccolo in there.”
“Eh?” Mikan looked alarmed. “Do you—usually swing piccolos?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Ibuki winked and flashed her a peace sign.

“Big Sis Mahiru and I found the best room!” Hiyoko declared. “It’s all painted and pretty, and there’s even a snow room where we made a snowwoman.”

“A—a snowman?” Mikan asked hesitantly. “I used to do that too. People would ask me to stand outside and roll me up in snow and—”

“A snowwoman, you dumb bitch.” Hiyoko stuck out her tongue. “What, are your ears still frozen?”

“EEEEEEK! I’m sorry!”

Hajime distinctly recalled the appearance of the snowwoman in that room. It definitely looked more like a snowman to him. But sure. Whatever. That didn’t matter anyway.

“That whole room is dangerous though,” Mahiru said. “I think we should be careful in there.”

“Eh? What do you mean?” Hajime asked.

“Well, I noticed it when we were moving the snow,” Mahiru explained. “There’s a lot of it there, but I thought felt something hard underneath it.”

“Something…hard?” Teruteru asked.

“Shut up, you pervert!” Mahiru squawked, a blush forming across her freckled face.

“Never mind him.” Twogami lowered his arms to his sides, staring at Mahiru imposingly. “Resume your explanation.”

“Um…so anyway,” Mahiru coughed into her hand before continuing. “It felt like ice to me, so I brushed aside some of the snow. It looks like there’s a frozen pool under the snow.”

“Neh?” Hiyoko balled her hands into fists. “What? And you let me stay in there?” Hajime sympathized. She’d let him go explore the room too.

“It’s pretty solid,” Mahiru said. “I don’t think it would break that easily, and it’s not all that deep either. I think.” She clasped her hands behind her back with a sigh. “I mean, maybe it’d be a different story with Nekomaru or Twogami.”

“Bwahaha!” Nekomaru laughed. “I appreciate your warning then. Hmm. Yes.”

“Oh? Oh?” Ibuki leaned in, holding a hand over her eyes as if she were shielding them from a bright light. “Whatcha thinking about, Nekomaru-chan?”

“Hmm? Nothing, nothing.” The large man laughed again. “More importantly, has anyone else discovered anything?”

“Well, I did find this delightful kitchen,” Teruteru replied. “It’s a bit too skimpy to suit the Ultimate Chef, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Meh. It has food, so who cares?” Akane punched her fist into her other hand. “Food is one of the first steps to surviving, you know? Plus it’s good,” she added with a grin.

“The counter in there takes up far too much space,” Teruteru continued. “I never thought I would
say this, but it’s too big. Too big! Just sticking out like that…humph.”

Nekomaru cracked his fingers. “What good is all that food going to be when there’s nowhere to shit?”

“What? That can’t be true!” Kazuichi gasped. “Nowhere to—there must be!”

“Nope.” Fuyuhiko said. “Nowhere.”

“That’s true.” Mitarai nodded, but he kept looking down. “That Endirya person said so.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s true, you know.” Hiyoko glowered at him, a dark look drooping across her face. “Sheesh. You don’t need to believe that guy so easily.”

“But we did not see one anywhere,” Peko said. “Nobody else found one either, correct?”

“That is true.” Sonia touched a finger to her bottom lip. “I do not want to believe it myself, but it seems like we have no other choice.”

No other choice, huh…? That applied to far more than just their bathroom situation. Actually, it felt like this was happening far too frequently. What choice had they really ever made at all, besides their own future? And now, even that was being denied them.

Does that sound like hope to you?

Junko Enoshima’s words rang as clearly as Izuru’s in his head. Hajime took a half-step forward—more catching himself mid-stumble than really trying to move. Junko Enoshima…there was no way she could be the one behind this. She was dead.

“If there’s not a way out of here,” Kazuichi said, “then that means…what are we going to do?”

A brief silence fell over the room as everyone looked at Hajime. Great. Just great. He didn’t know what to tell them yet. But he had to say something.

“Ahm.” Hajime coughed into his hand. “Okay, so.” Not for the first time, he wished he could pull out one of those many, many talents he allegedly had. Ultimate Orator would be wonderful right about now. But there was nothing, of course. He couldn’t do that. And Izuru…Izuru had spoken to him, hadn’t he? He’d tried to warn him. That command not to breathe—Hajime felt certain it had been Izuru.

But he couldn’t worry about that right now.

“I hope you weren’t all just looking for a means of escape,” Twogami said.

“Ah—!” Hajime realized he must have taken too long to say something.

“Huh? What does that mean?” Hiyoko asked.

“Ah!” Mahiru snapped her fingers. “You mean have we found out anything about our captors, right?”

“You mean the people holding us here?” Kazuichi asked.

Yes…that is what ‘captors’ would mean. Hajime frowned. He’d more been searching for an escape than for information about these people. Had anything he found been a clue at all? He was beginning to feel as if all he’d succeeded in doing was wasting his time.
“Well, there’s that Illusionist guy,” Mitarai said.

“No mortal illusions can fool the All-Seeing Eye,” Gundham purred.

“Indubitably!” Sonia pumped her fist in the air.

“Tch? Him? What about him?” Akane yawned. “His fighting potential is even lower than yours was, Hajimmy.”

Either call me a nickname or don’t…don’t be inconsistent with it, Hajime thought. Also—was that really a necessary comparison? He wasn’t that bad, surely.

“It is odd, isn’t it?” Mikan pressed her fingers together nervously. “He’s observing us, I think?”

“The rules did say we can’t attack him,” Kazuichi added, nodding. “So he’s not really a participant like us.”

“And he did admit to being one of the people who trapped us here,” Peko said.

“Tch. He and his cronies messed with the wrong crew,” Fuyuhiko said. “You bastards are all pretty damn persistent. I’ll give you that much. Well, I guess that includes me as well.”

“Mhm. Mhm.” Ibuki nodded. “You did slit your own stomach open. It was like—shick. And then blood everywhere! Waaah!”

“I did not need such a visual,” Sonia said, blanching slightly.

“Emo little shit,” Hiyoko snorted.

“That’s not the point here!” Kazuichi barked.

“I haven’t noticed much besides that petite figure of his,” Teruteru remarked, stroking his chin. “Reminds me a bit of you, Miss Sonia. Hmhmhm.”

“You impudent fool!” Gundham made what Hajime could only describe as a complex series of hand waves and signs, as if he were casting a spell straight out of some anime. “Do you desire that badly for your eyes to burn in your sockets?”

“That doesn’t sound attractive at all!” Teruteru cried out.

Kazuichi sighed in frustration but said nothing.

Hajime opened his mouth to try and get everyone on track, but before he could, Mahiru spoke up.

“Hey! Shut up!” She demanded. The sheer force of her order lapsed everyone into silence. She gave them all an overly sweet smile. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t find any clues that Endirya didn’t already tell us,” Mitarai said hesitantly. Hajime was pleasantly surprised to see that Mitarai was the first one to speak up after Mahiru’s command. He hadn’t expected that from the animator. “I think they’ve been more careful than that.”

“You think so?” Nagito asked. It got slightly harder to breathe as everyone turned toward him.

“What are you saying?” Nekomaru asked. “Speak up!”

“Well, when you asked Endirya if he and the others were with the Future Foundation, they
deflected.” Nagito recounted. “But they knew an awful lot about how the other killing games worked. Monokuma, the standard Monopads as our ID handbooks, and even some of the rules behind the killing games.”

“They could have watched the broadcast of the first killing game though, right? The one in Hope’s Peak?” Mikan asked. “I mean…I think they could have.”

“Maybe.” Nagito crossed his arms. “The way he talked sounded plural though.”

“Oh, yeah. Now that you mention it.” Kazuichi spoke slowly and nodded even more so, as if just realizing with whom he was agreeing.

“Enoshima said she was showing our—our game—to the Future Foundation, yeah?” Fuyuhiko nearly spat out the word ‘game.’

“Does that mean they’re members?” Ibuki asked.

“Perhaps,” Gundham mused in a low voice. “Have the wolves crept in with the sheep?”

“It doesn’t necessarily mean that, does it?” Kazuichi asked. “I mean, they could have hacked in, right?”

“Hold on,” Nekomaru boomed. “You said that most of the Future Foundation wanted us eliminated. So Enoshima couldn’t have been showing it to all of them, could she?”

“Ah! You’re right!” Teruteru chimed in. “Maybe it was just for a select audience.”

“Like N-naegi and Kirigiri?” Mikan looked even paler than usual. “So these guys are f-from the same division as them?”

“Nobody’s listening to what I said about hacking!” Kazuichi interjected.

“In other words, we’re right back to square one,” Hiyoko said, making a face. “Maybe they’re with the Future Foundation, maybe they aren’t. Either way, nobody here’s smart enough to figure it out.”

“You might want to calm down a little,” Mahiru urged. Hiyoko stuck out her lower lip and looked away with a small huff, while Mahiru turned back with an apologetic smile. “This is all just really hard for her. I’m sure you guys can relate, right?”

“I’ll say.” Teruteru had retrieved the comb he kept stored in his apron and was now playing with it. “No one ever thought this would be happening again. Honestly, I—I want to deny it and say it isn’t real.”

“It is though,” Mitarai said softly.

“It is,” Twogami agreed. He gave the animator a long, searching look before turning back toward Hajime. “Hajime, I know this might be a little…difficult. But is there some way you could talk to Izuru?”

Hajime started. Izuru?

“Izuru Kamukura?” Peko’s eyes flashed.

“That’s the Hope dude, yeah?” Akane asked.
“Yeah. He might be able to get us out of this.” Sonia agreed. “It is certainly worth a try.”

“I…I guess,” Hajime muttered. He already knew, even before he tried it, that Izuru wasn’t going to respond. The other felt like a constant shadow in his mind. Always there but never reachable. Izuru’s warning earlier today…how long had it been since he’d spoken? Let alone done something like take over Hajime’s body to save him from—ugh—falling in the shower. God, that would have been embarrassing.

Izuru?

Nothing, of course. He was right.

Izuru, I know you’re there. This is important. Say something.

“…."

“It’s no use,” Hajime said, raising his voice so the others could hear. “He won’t respond.”

“What do you mean he won’t respond?” Kazuichi whined. “Doesn’t he understand the situation we’re in?”

“He does…I think,” Hajime responded. He had to. Izuru was always aware of everything—often to an infuriating degree. There was no way something like this could have slipped past him. He hadn’t disappeared, after all. Not yet. But then, that was just another reason to get out of here as soon as possible. He couldn’t do anything to save Izuru from in here. Not that he even knew how to do that in the first place.

But if they just did it, then things would turn out okay. That was what he wanted to believe.

“Look,” Hajime said, trying to head off the storm of outcries. “I don’t know what Izuru’s thinking. But we’re going to make it out of this. With or without his help.”

As if unable to ignore those words, a familiar chuckle came from the stage area. Time slowed down as Hajime and the others turned in that direction. For a moment, the stage appeared to be empty. The thick curtains hung low on either side, swooping upwards in an almost snakelike pattern. Mounted beneath them was a small wooden podium. Had that been there before? Hajime didn’t think so.

A shadow darted out from behind a curtain and leapt up onto the podium. Monokuma.

“Hey, hey, my lovely friends.” The robotic bear looked friendly, almost sickeningly so. “Did you miss me? You missed me. I missed you too.”

“Ah…didn’t we just see you though?” Ibuki asked.

“Reunions are so cheery,” Monokuma continued. He was definitely ignoring her. “Oh, they just make me want to fry you up, stab you, give you a lethal injection….”

“Ah…don’t you think that’s a little overboard?” Mikan asked.

“That’s more than a little overboard!” Mahiru said.

“Indeed. Mortal flesh is so fragile,” Gundham agreed.

“So? Why are you here?” Fuyuhiko spat, looking off to one side as if he were too cool for any of this. Ever since Monokuma had appeared, Peko had not-so discretely placed herself between
Fuyuhiko and the robotic bear. Even now, her intense gaze followed every movement.

“Agreed.” Nekomaru, on the other hand, looked like he might explode any second. “Enough of this cowardice! Come out and face us like a man!”

“Junko was a woman though,” Mitarai said quietly. So much so that Hajime wondered how many people had even heard him.

“Are you here to give us a motive?” Nagito asked.

“A motive? What are you saying?” Sonia’s paling was noticeable even against the lightness of her skin. “That cannot be. It just cannot be!”

“There’s no way we’d ever do something like that again,” Teruteru added.

“That’s right,” Hajime said, stepping forward. “It doesn’t matter what you do, Monokuma. It doesn’t matter what motive you give us. We will never betray each other.”

“Never, huh?” Monokuma seemed surprisingly more relaxed than angry. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Are we really going through this again? We have hope. We believe in each other. Come on now. That shtick is even more repetitive than me! And at least I’m cute.”

“About as cute as a bowl of barf,” Hiyoko sneered.

“Yeah.” Kazuichi rubbed the back of his head. “I mean, you don’t even have…well, you’re not exactly built, you know? Of course, I’d still be happy to take you apart.” The way he said that didn’t sound like a threat.

“Anyway.” Monokuma stuck a paw in his mouth. “You all should be a little happier to see me! One would think you’d like to see a little despair in your lives.”

“Who would think that?” Peko demanded.

“Well, it would just be boring otherwise.” Monokuma frowned. “I said it before, didn’t I? No one wants to see a story where people just get along all the time. It’s boring! I’d read that books about gray contours before I watched something like that!”

“Oh?” Ibuki leaned in. “Are you talking about Fifty Sh—”

“But killing games? That shit never gets old.” Monokuma chuckled. “We could do it over and over and over! That’s how great it is. We could even do it fifty three times! Bwahaha! People just love to see despair, you know. Despair drives ratings!”

“Don’t be stupid.” Twogami said in a huffy voice. “Nobody wants to see anything like that.”

“Yeah!” Akane agreed loudly, cracking her knuckles. “If anyone wanted to see such a thing, I’d bash their heads in!”

“Akane…that is a little violent, is it not?” Sonia displayed a little smile as she said that though. Hajime felt a mild sense of concern.

“But that’s exactly what people love,” Monokuma countered. “Think about it. What kind of news do people love watching the most? War stories. Celebrity fighting. The latest political gaffe. Sex scandals. All that despair and misery—that’s what people love to see.”

“About that motive,” Nagito cut in.
“Oho! You’re an eager one, aren’t you, Komaeda?” The jagged red scar over Monokuma’s eye seemed to glow in malicious anticipation.

“Hey.” Hajime took another step forward. “Are you saying that’s not what you’re here for?”

“Well of course I am.” Monokuma sighed. “Jeez. Are you guys really going to force me to make the first motive be ‘kill someone or you all die?’ That’s so clichéd. Honestly, I would almost feel despair myself, using an old hat trick like that.”

“Why do we need a motive anyway?” Nekomaru asked. “You already took away our access to any restrooms. Like a true monster.”

“And you’re not telling us our forbidden actions either,” Mahiru chimed in.

“Yeah, so what?” Monokuma cocked his head to one side. “You call those motives? Nah. Those are just the rules of the game. Or maybe I should call them incentives?”

“Incentives?” Gundham uncrossed his arms. “Do not say such foolish things.”

“It’s not even just about the motive, you know.” Monokuma continued onward as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “There’s also the traitor to consider.”

“Traitor?” Kazuichi repeated. “No, no…”

“Calm down,” Twogami urged. “There is no traitor. Monokuma’s just trying to confuse us.”

"There was a traitor last time though." Fuyuhiko growled.

Right...Chiaki....

“But it’s in the rules,” Monokuma said. “I never lie about rules.”

“Maybe it’s like it was in my killing game—the one I was in, I mean.” Mitarai ventured. “You know, with these.” He held up his hand, and his sleeve slipped back toward his elbow, revealing his wristband. “Maybe one of these will be forcing people to kill.”

“Upupupu. You’re a bright animator, aren’t you?” Monokuma waggled his paw at everyone. “As a matter of fact, yes. One of you does have a compulsory action to kill someone. But that person is not the traitor.”

“One of us has a compulsory action to kill someone?” Peko asked.

“Not the traitor?” That was Fuyuhiko.

“What does that mean?” Akane gasped.

“There is no traitor. Calm down!” Hajime snapped, trying to ward off the storm he felt certain was coming. “We need to discuss this calmly.” The last thing they needed was for everyone to start doubting each other. The other last thing they needed was for someone to go to extreme lengths to try and root out the traitor, if they even existed.

“By the way,” Monokuma said. “I suppose I should make it a rule that nobody can share their forbidden actions. Most of you don’t even know them yet, but even so.” A faint buzzing sound emanated from Hajime’s pocket, and even without looking, he knew that the Monopad had just implemented the update.
Hajime grit his teeth. Everything was so clearly being done to try and divide them further. Erode whatever sense of trust they had. That had worked pretty well in the Neo World Program, when they thought they hadn’t known each other. But now—hold on. Taking their memories then had… sure, it had been necessary in trying to spur their recovery from despair. But it had also removed their incentive to trust each other. Why hadn’t these people removed their memories too?

“Who cares about that?” Fuyuhiko growled. “Why would you give someone a compulsory action to kill like that? What’s the point of giving us motives if you’re just going to cheat?”


“Repeating it that many times makes it more suspicious,” Mahiru groaned, rubbing her head.

“That’s right!” Teruteru pointed at Monokuma. “It’s not a game if you force people to play!”

“I don’t really want to hear that from you,” Peko muttered.

“Hmm?” Monokuma tilted his head. “But it’s not a game if no one plays either.”

“Th-that’s—” Mikan began.

“So,” Monokuma casually interrupted her. “Maybe it is a little trite, but I think that’ll be our first motive! If you don’t kill someone, then all of you will die! Isn’t that just awful? Everybody dying would be so violent, dontcha know? None of you want that, right?”

“Eh?”

“What?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No way!”

The cries and protests all bled together. Monokuma spread his arms out. “Now, now,” the demonic bear chortled. “No questions, no questions. I’m a busy bear! I’ve got lots of nuts to connect before winter!”

“But that’s squirrels though…..”

“Eh? Monokuma collects nuts?”

“That’s not the issue!” Nekomaru interjected.

“You all know how this works,” Monokuma said. “Beating, burning, crushing, drowning, yada yada yada. Whatever your murder plan is, you better make it a good one. You’ve only got 48 hours before everybody dies. Ahahaha!”

With that proclamation, the bear leapt down from the podium and disappeared behind the stage curtains.

“Wait!” Hajime called after him, but it was too late. Monokuma was gone. Letting out a single huff, he turned back to his friends. The expressions of shock and disbelief and fear they had mirrored theirs from when they’d first woken up here. When they’d first heard that they were expected to participate in another killing game.
“Hey.” Kazuichi said slowly. “He didn’t mean that, right? He wouldn’t really kill everyone, right?”

“He would,” Peko declared. “Come on, Kazuichi. You know what we’re dealing with.”

“But I mean, we already went through one of these,” Kazuichi continued. “Why are we doing this again?”

“That is a mystery,” Gundham drawled.

Kazuichi made a face. “Not you! I don’t want your agreement.”

“Making an enemy of the Dark Overlord is a foolish decision,” Gundham countered. “Being a mere mortal, perhaps you cannot comprehend my power.”

“Ibuki thinks it’s like when a radio plays a popular song over and over again,” Ibuki interrupted. “So much so that it becomes an unpopular one. It’s like all that cutesy crap my old bandmates loved.”

“So…I didn’t really get most of that,” Mikan said. “But, ah, um, are you saying that they’re doing this because they l-liked the killing game and wanted to replicate it?”

“I guess that’s possible.” Nekomaru said.

“Well, if the coach says so, then it makes sense to me!” Akane grinned.

“Didn’t that Endirya guy say it was a punishment though?” Mitarai spoke up, his cheeks flushing red as if he were somehow exerting himself. “For what you…we…did?”

“Did he say that?” Mahiru frowned, glancing down.

“I don’t remember! I-I’m sorry!” Mikan wailed.

“He implied something like that.” Twogami rubbed his glasses on his tie before bringing them back up to his face. His suit sleeves slipped over his bulging skin. “At this point, all we have are theories. No one’s found anything that’ll help us make any concrete decisions.”

“Well then.” Teruteru straightened up and patted himself. “Perhaps we should discuss how we’d like to spend these last 48 hours? I certainly have a few ideas.”

Two days…that was right. They had a mere two days before they would all be wiped out. It was so maddeningly unfair that Hajime wanted to scream. But he couldn’t. If he broke down—no, he couldn’t. He needed to be strong now. Not just for himself, but for the others as well. This couldn’t turn out like last time. Not just last time—this situation reminded him of Strawberry and Grape House in particular. They were trapped in an area and under a time limit to kill. For perhaps the first time, Nagito was no longer his primary concern—at least among his friends. Now it was Gundham. The fantastic breeder who refused to give up on life.

Looking at him now, Gundham didn’t look like someone who was planning a murder. His mouth was hidden behind his scarf, but he was running a hand through his hair as he chatted with Sonia. It was nice, seeing how close the two of them had gotten. Poor Kazuichi though.

Rather than bringing on an avalanche of ideas, Teruteru’s words had sent most of them into silence. Outside of Gundham and Sonia, nobody else said a word. And even those two spoke so quietly that Hajime couldn’t hear what they were saying.
“Well it’s obvious what we need to do, you shit-for-brains.” Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, it was Hiyoko who recovered first. “If there’s just 48 hours, then we need to get out of here before then.”

“Did you bother looking at all?” Fuyuhiko scoffed. “That’s what we spent our time doing. Yet we didn’t find a way out.”

“Monokuma’s getting in and out, isn’t he?” Hiyoko said.

“I saw him drop down through the roof earlier,” Hajime replied. “He’s a lot smaller than us, you know.” He hadn’t meant for it to sound quite like that, especially considering who he was talking to. But then, Hiyoko wasn’t small anymore anyway.

“So?” Teruteru demanded. “Size doesn’t matter anyway. It’s how you use—”

“Ew!” Hiyoko made a face like she’d eaten something gross.

“Monokuma might be able to get into areas we cannot,” Peko said. “But what about our other captor?”

“Huh? You mean Endirya-chan?” Ibuki asked.

“Don’t give him that honorific!” Mahiru protested. “He trapped us here, you know?”

“That is a good point,” Sonia mused. She’d finished her conversation with Gundham and was now standing with the others, hands clasped before her. “He must have some way of getting in and out, yes?”

“It’s useless.” Fuyuhiko cut her off. “We can’t attack him according to the rules, and he’s not just going to give us the key.”

“But if we are going to die anyway,” Mitarai said, “then shouldn’t we at least try something? We can’t…we can’t just give up, you know?”

That question submerged everyone in yet another discomfiting silence. Silence. Hajime threw a quick glance in Nagito’s direction. He was still there, but he hadn’t said anything in a while. He wasn’t think about doing anything crazy, right? He wouldn’t revert back to how he’d been in the simulation? It had taken so much time for Hajime to begin trusting him normally, and even then, he still hadn’t decided whether or not to forgive Nagito. He felt like he had, most times. But every so often, there was this…no, it didn’t matter.

“I suppose,” Peko began, “that such an option would be a suitable last resort.”

“Eh?” Mikan threw up her arms defensively, as if she were already anticipating the need to protect herself. “You’re not serious?”

“I agree,” Gundham growled. “Regardless of good or evil, action itself is commendable. There is not a creature alive who would so easily give up on life.”

That was exactly the philosophy Hajime had been afraid of hearing. But if it was being used like this…if they were going to die anyway, then maybe it really was better to at least try fighting first.

“Okay,” Hajime said. “Okay. But only as a last resort, alright? Nobody do anything crazy until we can all talk about this and work out a plan. We’ve got two days after all.” Getting bogged down in a fight didn’t top his list of ideal solutions. But the list itself was already pretty thin, and it’s not
like any of them were too moral or righteous to resort to violence. Naegi wouldn’t have done it. But he wasn’t Naegi.

Now that they had a sense of purpose, however fatalistic, the room seemed slightly brighter. A few people began slipping out, presumably to resume searching for a way out of this place. Hajime let them go. He doubted the conversation would progress much beyond the point where he’d left it. As he looked around though, his gaze landed on one of the cameras in the room. Doubtlessly, whoever was listening in had heard everything they’d talked about. But that was unavoidable. There had been cameras in every room, even the snow one. Definitely the dorm rooms, though how much could be seen with those cramped ceiling and dim lights was a mystery.

All in all, though, it looked like he had some free time now. Taking a little time to himself to relax, or try to relax, felt as welcoming an idea as a warm bed or a hot bath in the springs. Even eating and playing a card game by the pool with everyone—had that really happened last night? It already felt like ages ago. Hajime permitted himself a single sigh. Alright. What to do now…?  

Stopping briefly in the kitchen to pick up some water, Hajime found that nearly everyone had filtered out of the dining hall by the time he returned. He grabbed a seat next to Mitarai, mostly because the guy had been by himself at one of the tables and looked like he might freak out.

“Mind if I join you?” Hajime asked. Since he’d already sat down, he didn’t think Mitarai would object. He was like Mikan in that regard—a bit too timid for his own good.

Hajime’s deduction was proved when correct when Mitarai shook his head. “Mmm. That’s fine.”

“Want some?” Hajime held out one of the water bottles he’d picked up in the kitchen. He kept another for himself, tucking a third into his jeans.

“Thanks.” Mitarai took it. Uncapping it, he took a long draught of water before wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. “Say, Hinata.”

Hajime waited, but nothing followed that statement. “Hmm?”

“Do you think people like seeing killing games?”

The question was so bizarre that it took Hajime several seconds to be sure he’d heard correctly. “Erm.”

“I know Junko was behind a lot of them.” Mitarai dug his fingers into his sleeves, as though he were clinging to them. “But she always wanted to show them to people. To bring them to despair. Tengan didn’t. I mean, he wanted me to—to use a different program to show people hope.” His body seemed to contract in on itself as he nearer the topic of brainwashing the world, and he hurriedly brushed past it. “People take a lot of influence from the things they see, yeah? You think so too, right? You think fiction influences people?”

“I—I guess so.” Hajime said, nonplussed. This conversation rang a little like the one he’d had with Nagito about fairy tales.

“I think a killing game might work in the same way,” Mitarai murmured. “You know how people can watch news of faraway events without them feeling real? When there’s distance, people can disconnect themselves from what they’re seeing. When you look at it like that…it’s possible to start enjoying it, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think a show about killing games is the kind of thing I’d watch,” Hajime answered.
“I think some people would,” Mitarai said. “There’s this…fascination with the terrible. It’s like that.”

“Where are you going with all this anyway?” Hajime asked, uncapping his own water. “Do you think that it’s being broadcast this time too—as entertainment?”

“Junko thought it would bring people despair, right?” Mitarai kept going. A little water splashed out of his open bottle and down his suit, but he didn’t notice. “Yours was meant as a trap. And the other one was supposed to demoralize people. Watching the symbols of hope kill each other was supposed to fill the world with despair. But you know…why didn’t she use my anime for that?”

“Eh?” Hajime had not expected to have such difficulty in following this train of thought. But there were definitely leaps in logic here that he wasn’t getting.

“To brainwash people,” Mitarai explained, and suddenly Hajime saw the connection. “She did it to over 2,000 people with the Reserve Course. So if she had that kind of broadcasting capability, why didn’t she use it to brainwash the world? Instead she let the killing game speak for itself.”

“I don’t think there’s much point in trying to understand why she did anything,” Hajime said. “She said it herself. Despair is her characterization. Enoshima was…chaotic, I guess.”

Mitarai looked at him. Seconds passed.

“Oi,” Hajime said. “What are you—?”

“I’m sorry if this is rude,” Mitarai began, “or insensitive, but….” He passed the water bottle back and forth before eventually setting it on the table. “Do you think maybe Izuru would know?”

He supposed he should have expected that. Still.

“I don’t know.” Hajime replied. He set his water down on the table. “He doesn’t talk to me anymore.” He was beginning to get fed up with explaining this over and over. Just because he shared a mental space or an eye with Izuru didn’t mean he knew anything about what the other was thinking or feeling.

“Right,” Mitarai said quietly.

“What makes you think they’re broadcasting it this time anyway?” Hajime asked, glancing over at the camera in the corner. “Seems like it would be a way for Monokuma to keep an eye on us.”

“Maybe,” Mitarai agreed. “I mean…it’s not Junko this time. Junko always broadcasted it.” He lowered his head. “I just don’t see why they’d go to all this trouble if they weren’t broadcasting it. Why not simply kill everyone? It’s like an anime, you know? It can easily get boring without a story.”

“You sound like you’ve spent a lot of time worrying about this,” Hajime observed.

“Ah, you think so? Maybe.” Mitarai sniffled slightly even though he hadn’t been crying at all. He played with the water bottle in his hands. “It’s just that…ever since this happened, I started thinking about it again. You know. My anime.” He jerked his head in Hajime’s direction and then immediately away again. Mitarai…was he afraid of hearing what Hajime thought about that? Even back on the ship, it had been apparent that Mitarai had a harder time talking about what had happened than the rest of them. Although, Hajime supposed, they had gotten more time to get used to that. As used to being mass terrorists as one could possibly get, anyway.
“You’re wondering if we made the right decision,” Hajime said. It wasn’t a question.


Hajime sipped at his water to buy him time to find an answer. Then he sipped again. “The future is like the sea,” he finally told Mitarai. “You pick a direction and just…go. You don’t know what you’ll find out there. So when a wave or a storm comes, it’s easy to say that you picked badly and went in the wrong direction. But you know, you had no way of knowing what would happen when you picked that road.” Speaking that abstractly wasn’t at all in his usual style. He could tell with how clumsily most of that came out. Lots of awkward pauses as he reoriented himself every few words. Not to mention mixing up metaphors with the sea and a road. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that it’s hard to know for sure. We have to keep going anyway. Believe in each other, and in the choices we make, and try to build a better future that way.”

“…huh,” Mitarai said.

“If it helps though,” Hajime added, “I still think not brainwashing the world was the right decision.”

“Yeah.” Mitarai shifted a little in his seat. Hajime felt certain that if he’d been on the floor, he would have had his knees up to his chest. “You’re right. Thanks, Hinata.”

“Sure…Ryota. Can I call you that?”

Mitarai had looked up, surprised, at hearing his first name. His wide eyes stared at Hajime for a handful of seconds before he nodded.

Hajime gave him a light smile. “Thanks.” He stood up, feeling like he and Ryota had grown a little closer today. Between the party and this…maybe it was a little too early to say he’d fully adapted. But he was definitely making progress.

Hajime stepped out of the dining room, loosely carrying his water bottle in one hand. The other weighed heavily in his pocket. He still had someone else he needed to talk to.

However, that plan was thwarted the moment he stepped into the hallway and spotted Mahiru slipping into the painted hallway. It’s not that it made him suspicious at all. But he couldn’t help himself. He followed after her, mostly to assuage the uneasy feeling clenching his chest.

He found her standing before the painting of a bridge. The depth and shades of blue running underneath it almost made the water seem real. Though that was, of course, impossible. A young couple was approaching the bridge, but they were painted into the background, too small to make out any distinct features. For her part, Mahiru let out a little sigh. One hand rested atop the camera hanging around her neck.

“Mahiru?” He asked, moving over to stand beside her.

“Eh? Jeez!” She nearly jumped. “Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

“Eh? Sorry.” He hadn’t really sneaked up on her though…. “Anyway, everything alright?” He asked.

Mahiru snorted. “ Seriously?”

“Yeah, I guess it was a dumb question,” he agreed. “But you know what I mean.”

“Ah, I guess so,” she said. “This whole situation is completely insane.”
“Yeah. Yeah, that about sums it up.” He offered her the other water bottle. "Here. Calm down a little."

“I wasn’t just thinking about that though,” she continued, as if he hadn’t said anything. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I never thought we’d have to do something like this again. Or even the first time, for that matter. To trap all of us here…Hiyoko…who would do something like that?” Her words were no longer slow or measured as they burst from her. “What is it with all this killing anyway? We’ve had enough! Why does it keep coming back to this? Fuyuhiko and Peko in the first killing game, and everything that happened. And this. And this—!” She lifted her camera slightly. The strap tugged against her neck. “There are so many pictures on here that I’d forgotten about. I was supposed to get people smiling. Something so simple. And instead….” She dropped the camera. It banged twice against her chest before settling, still supported by the strap.

There were so many concerns running through her head that Hajime had no clue where to even begin. He floundered for something to latch onto. “Er, ah….” He swallowed. “You’re right. But it’s not exactly the same you know.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Mahiru wore an expression that suggested she had a headache. She grabbed the water he’d offered earlier. "Thanks." Uncapping it, she tossed her head back and took a quick sip. Her breathing seemed to slow a little. “We all trust each other and we’re going to get along, right? I know we’re all saying that, and I’d like to think it’s true, but do you really believe that? What about Fuyuhiko? Peko? Nagito? Or even Gundham—from what I heard, I don’t think he’s going to accept us waiting around to die.”

“I think having a plan to fight our captors at the last moment will help with that,” Hajime replied. “Or, as you said, I’d like to think that’s true.”

“I’m not so sure about that plan either,” Mahiru said. “It seems really risky, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Hajime admitted. Of course he’d already known that. But. “What else can we do?”

“Ah!” Mahiru began curling her short, red hair around her finger. “I guess we don’t have a whole lot of options, huh?”

“You—you already knew that.” Hajime said. Surely someone as smart as Mahiru couldn’t have been unaware of that before now.

“Yeah. I suppose.” Mahiru allowed in a long, slow hum. “I just didn’t tell it to myself, you know?” She laid one hand on the painted wall before her. “I guess we can’t do that anymore.”

“Maybe not,” Hajime spoke softly. “But we can do our best, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Mahiru turned to face him, a faint smile stretching across her lips. “You’ve gotten so optimistic, Hajime.”

“You think so?” He wasn’t sure how to react to that either. He suspected that was a compliment, but it made him feel more awkward than happy. Why that was, he wasn’t entirely sure. Because he didn’t want to turn into another Naegi?

“Aw, come on.” Mahiru must have sensed his hesitation. Or maybe seen his expression. “I don’t usually compliment you, you know. You could at least man up and take it.”

“Right. Ah…thanks.”

“A bit late, but eh. I can’t exactly call you unreliable anymore.” Her smile was a little sweeter this
time. She took another drink of water. “So did you just come here to talk to me?”

“I guess I have been kinda checking up on people.” Hajime allowed. “Trying not to make the same mistakes as before. Say the things that need to be said….” Like thanking Chiaki. In situations like this, there was no telling how much time you actually had with someone. Even now, as he was doing his best to make himself believe that everything would be okay, a small part of him continued sinking deeper and deeper into doubt. "Make sure no one's getting into trouble, you know.”

“That reminds me,” she said. “Do you have any idea what Endirya was doing in that other room? When I was in there earlier, he had a few boxes, but he told me to go away.”

“It looked like he was setting a few things up,” Hajime said. “If I had to guess, I’d say it was possible equipment for…well.” There wasn’t any way to avoid the topic. “Committing murder.”

“Yeah, I had that feeling too,” she said sadly. “We can’t rope off that room or anything, but we should probably take an inventory of everything there. Maybe even set up a guard shift.”

“That’s a good idea, actually.” Hajime agreed, thinking it over. Items from Rocketpunch Market had been used in pretty much every murder. As the islands they could explore expanded, setting up a constant stream of people to guard it became less and less feasible. But with a small area like this, it should be….

“They’d probably stop us though….” Mahiru brought one finger up to her cheek as she thought.

“Maybe, but it’s worth a try. It’s at least doing something,” Hajime urged. “Even if we can’t set up a shift, we can at least see everything that’s there.”

“Yeah!” Mahiru bobbed her head in agreement. “I’ll leave that to you then.”

“Hmm? Really?” That was unusual. “You don’t want to come?”

“Nah.” Mahiru turned back toward the painted walls. “I want to just…hang out in here for a little longer.” She ran her hand over the scene again. “I wonder if I could have been a painter instead…."

She appeared to be talking more to herself than him, so Hajime left her in there. Closing the door slowly behind him, he slowly looked toward his right. As if in response to him, the door opened, and the rather unlikely duo of Nagito and Mikan emerged.

“Hinata! Ehehe! Hi there!” Mikan seemed strangely at ease—which, Hajime supposed, was better than her squealing and shrieking all the time. At least she didn’t have anything to trip over.

“Is everything all right?” Hajime asked, looking between the both of them.

“Huh? I think so.” Nagito replied. “Tsumiki and I were just taking a look at the equipment Endirya laid out for us. Wasn’t that thoughtful of him?”

That was certainly a word for it….

“I wanted to see if there would be any medical instruments,” Mikan said, pressing her fingertips together. “They’re good for helping me calm down, so Endirya gave me this.” She held up a small roll of bandages. “Aren’t they cute?” They were plain white and ordinary, with no decorations of any kind. Not exactly cute, Hajime thought.

But she was still waiting for an answer. “Ah…I guess….”
“Ehehe. Come see me if you get hurt, okay? I’ll use lots and lots of bandages on you.” Mikan laughed. Except she also sounded deadly serious. With her usual pitiful demeanor, Hajime had almost forgotten this side of her.

“What else was there?” Hajime asked.

“Not much really,” Nagito answered. “A lot of basic tools, mostly. Screwdrivers and hammers and such. A rope. There was a pretty large knife. And—”

“A knife?” Hajime repeated. Obviously there was no way they could leave something like that alone. “Excuse me.”

Slipping past Nagito and Mikan, Hajime hurried into the storage room. It retained its cold, metallic feeling, but the general setup had definitely changed. It wasn’t just the shelves. Racks of clothing had been laid out. Clothing that was—theirs? Hajime took a few steps forward, and before he knew it, he was touching the familiar fabric of his own shirt. Yes. There were exact copies of all their clothes set up here like clothing on a costume rack.

“What is this?” He whispered aloud.

“Are you surprised we took such preparations?” Endirya’s lilting voice emerged from the shadows before he did. “We’ve been paying attention to you for a long time now.”

There he was…the long-haired boy in black wound his way toward Hajime, almost like a snake. Gritting his teeth, Hajime released the shirt and stepped back. “What else is in here?” He demanded.

Endirya raised an arm to indicate the shelves. “Take a look for yourself.”

When Hajime didn’t move, Endirya laughed. “I’m not going to hurt you. You can look.”

Barely mastering the urge to growl, Hajime stalked over to the shelves. It really did appear to be a lot of junk. Hammers and screwdrivers and rope, like Nagito mentioned. A few flashlights, a bucket, a—a saw? There was a saw too? Funny how Nagito never mentioned that. And there was the knife. He grabbed both and kept searching to see if there was anything else dangerous. There was a box cutter, and the screwdrivers and hammers were both possible weapons. He reached out to pick one of them up too.

“No,” came the quiet voice from behind him.

Hajime cast a quick glance over his shoulder. “Eh? No what?”

Endirya shook his head. “Nobody gets more than two.”

“Nobody gets—what are you talking about?” Hajime demanded.

Endirya raised his eyebrows. “I told you. Nobody can take more than two items from this room.”

That seemed incredibly arbitrary. “Fine,” Hajime huffed. The saw and knife were probably the most dangerous anyway. He could ask Fuyuhiko or someone to pick up some of the others. Not wanting to spend another second in here with Endirya, he turned on his heel and marched toward the exit. Another question, however, stilled his step. “Say…”

“Hm?”
"That rule about taking two things. Does that apply to the traitor as well?" Assuming there even was a traitor. Everyone wanted to think there wasn't. Including Hajime. But there wouldn't be any harm in asking.

Endirya offered him a dry smile. "How funny. You're the second person to ask me that."

Second? "Who was the first?"

"Nagito Komaeda, of course." Endirya shook his head slightly. "I can't say I was surprised. He's not quite as interesting as you are, Hajime. May I call you Hajime?"

Hajime didn't answer. He felt strangely stiff as a chill swept down his back. He was fairly confident that even his ahoge stood locked in a rigid, upright position. He had to clear his throat before he could speak again. "What did you tell him?"

"Of course, the traitor can only take two things as well. Whether that information will help you or not, well." Endirya's empty smile returned. "That's something I'd like to see."

Hajime hurried through the door, eager to leave behind the strange illusionist and his riddles. He already had enough of that with Nagito. But even as he pushed the door closed with his foot, he couldn't help the thought that the killing game itself wouldn't remain in that room. At that moment, with more certainty than he'd ever felt it before, Hajime knew that a killing was going to happen.

Chapter End Notes

As always, a huge thanks to those of you reading and enjoying this story. It wouldn't be around without you guys! *hugs*

Feel free to let me know what you thought in the comments below.

Chapters may be more infrequent - maybe one every 3-4 weeks instead of every 2. That's because setting out things for murders and investigations and trials and all is a lot more difficult. I'm terrified of making a mistake and having you all hate it, haha.

XD In before it happens anyw-

Enjoy! And if you're somewhere where it's cold (like me), stay warm!
Anxiety had an interesting effect on time. It sped by while trickling along with infuriating slowness. A minute leaked into an hour, none of it meaning much of anything. With no access to the outside, telling time became even more difficult. It was Strawberry and Grape House all over again. A killing game. A time limit. A traitor. Even their lack of awareness of where they were being kept. Were all of these similarities really just coincidences? Or, like they’d discussed before, had their captors somehow seen the broadcast sent to the Future Foundation? To Naegi and Togami and Kirigiri? Were they part of the Foundation? Or had they hacked in? These were all questions they’d talked about endlessly, but they continued buzzing in the background.

Hajime glared up at the surveillance camera in his room. 48 hours…how much of that remained? He didn’t think it had been that long since the motive. But with no phones, no sunlight, no clocks, he realized he had no way to tell. Akane might. She was pretty good about using her stomach as a clock. Then again, she was always hungry, so maybe not.

The knife and saw he’d taken from the storage room lay hastily shoved beneath his bed. He tried to reason himself out of feeling embarrassed by such a juvenile hiding spot. It’s not like the room offered an abundance of hiding places. At least the doors locked. Though without any keycards or even keys, the rooms could only be locked while they were occupied. That shouldn’t matter though. As long as Hajime checked every time he returned to the room and saw the weapons still there, he’d know they were safe.

Knowing that, though, did not ease his worry.

With only one way in and out of the storage room—and, indeed, every room—Hajime felt tempted to say that having someone stand guard right outside that room was ideal. That person could also monitor the hallway, and by doing so, monitor access to every other room except the lounge and the individual bedrooms. Maybe it would be a good idea to keep someone posted in that hallway too.

Of course, not having any way to measure the passage of time made guard duty difficult. But surely the others would understand the significance of doing so. He knew Mahiru would, since it had been her idea. He also felt confident Fuyuhiko and Peko would agree, which was why he had decided to go to them first. Instead of doing that though, he was lying on his bed feeling lost and confused. He still couldn’t explain what had happened in that room, but it really shook him up.

It was moments like this, more than any other, which made him wish Chiaki was still alive. Or even that Izuru would respond to him. But the silence in his head matched the silence in his room.

A silence that fell apart as someone pounded on the door. “Yahello? Hajime-chan?”

Well, that cheeriness could only belong to one person. The temptation to throw his arm over his eyes and groan tantalized him, but after a few seconds, he cast it aside. Swinging his legs up, he climbed off his bed and crossed over to open the door. “Hey, Ibuki.”

“Oho!” The perky musician flashed him a quick peace sign. “You were in here after all! Wow, your room’s pretty small, huh?”
“Eh?” He blinked. “Isn’t yours too?”

“No. It’s cozy.” She stuck her tongue out. “That’s totally different, Hajime-chan!”

It definitely wasn’t, but Hajime let her remark pass. “Everything alright, Ibuki?”

“Nope!” Ibuki laid her hands on her hip. “I just wanted to come do some headbanging with my favorite drummer.”

“…” Was—was that really why she came here? This girl….

“Why do you look like that?” Ibuki stuck out her lower lip. “We did it before! It’s fun.”

“I had a headache for ages,” Hajime muttered.

“That means you’re doing it right. Mhm. Mhm.” As if two verbal pronouncements weren’t enough, Ibuki nodded. “Plus I bet you can do it even better now, since you’ve got the Ultimate Percussionist with you!”

“I…don’t think that’s how it works.”

“We could do some screaming then,” Ibuki decided. “Yeah. Shouting is good for the soul!”

“But why?” Out of all the conversations he needed to have today, this was not one he’d expected.

“Huh? Did you forget?” Ibuki asked. “I told you before. It’s good practice for harmonizing your soul with a megaphone. Kyah! And I never use big words like harmonizing, so you know Ibuki is serious.”

“There aren’t even any megaphones here,” Hajime pointed out. “And if we just started screaming, people might get worried and think something was wrong.”

“Ooh! Then Ibuki can show you a new training technique!” She tossed herself onto Hajime’s bed with another cry. It didn’t bounce particularly well.

“Is throwing myself on my bed the technique?” Hajime asked dryly.

“No, no.” Ibuki rolled around on the bed like a puppy. Except she wasn’t a puppy, so it was more weird than cute. Then she abruptly sat up. “The Flying Girl Lands in a Feather Bed!”

Ibuki had always been crazy, but now Hajime began to seriously wonder if this situation had driven her over the edge. “Ibuki, are you—?”

“It’s a great name!” She crowed, bobbing gently up and down. “Come on, Hajime-chan! Try it! Do something totally crazy and then give it a name! It’s excellent practice for songwriting.”

How was it excellent practice for so—oh, whatever. The hurricane had already arrived. Might as well get swept along. Not that Hajime could think of anything crazy to do. He glanced around the spartanly furnished room, hoping for a flash of inspiration. “Ummm. Hmm. Boy Struggles to Find Song Title?”

Ibuki made a face.

“Alright then.” Hajime walked over and tapped her forehead. “Boy Pokes Girl the Musical.”

He felt immensely stupid about this whole thing, but Ibuki cracked up laughing. Her hands actually
went to hold her ribs as she rolled over again on the bed. He didn’t think it was particularly funny, but something about seeing just over overzealous Ibuki was being got to him, and he laughed too. She was being so ridiculous that he couldn’t help it.

Maybe that was the point…?

“You’re terrible at coming up with song names, Hajime-chan,” Ibuki managed to say between gasps and fits of laughter. Hiccupping herself back to seriousness, or as close to seriousness as she could get, she sat up on the bed. “Don’t worry though. Ibuki will do it for you! Then you’ll have to gimmie lots and lots of praise, yeah?”

Hajime rolled his eyes. “Sure thing.”

In a surprisingly fluid move, Ibuki sprang up. In a typically Ibuki move, her doing so resulted in her smacking her head on the ceiling. She toppled back onto the bed with a startled cry.

“Oi!” Hajime darted over to her side. “You alright?”

“Aaah.” Air hissed out and in from her teeth. “Oh, that hurt.” She rubbed her head furiously. “Owowowow.” Blinking up at Hajime, a slow smile spread across her face. “Headache and Heartbreak! That’s the song name for this moment.”

Whose heart was broken though? Oh, forget it, Hajime grumbled to himself. Just go with it.

“It’s all better now!” Ibuki declared, standing up more carefully this time. “I don’t even have to ask Akane to rub some spit in it.”

“Why would you do that at all though…?”

“Don’t sweat the details!” Ibuki winked. “You’re back to being super duper done with everything, Hajime-chan! That means you don’t even need the headbanging today.”

“I already said no—”


What—what did any of those people have in common?

As he pondered that, Ibuki strolled over to his door. “I have to go bring Kazuichi and Mikan into the band too,” she exclaimed. “I’ll see you later, Hajime-chan!”

“Yeah. See you.”

Once the door creaked its way closed, Hajime sighed. The cramped room seemed even more so now. Darker, too, not that he could be sure of that. Even so, Ibuki’s endless potential for optimism was really something. It still amazed Hajime how easily she’d gotten along with Mikan after what happened. Gundham and Nekomaru at least had had some kind of bizarre man’s pride going on. Or something like that. And now she was spending a lot of time with Kazuichi and Mikan too. They hadn’t interacted that much in the simulation, but it was nice to see. While their bonds were definitely stronger than before, most people had stayed close to their same friends. Hiyoko and Mahiru, Sonia and Gundham, Ryota and Twogami. But Ibuki was never one to stay conventional.
Feeling a tiny bit better, Hajime left his room as well. This time, he went straight to Fuyuhiko’s and knocked.

After a few seconds, Fuyuhiko opened the door. “Eh? What do you want?” The words were cold, but his tone wasn’t.

“I was hoping to talk to you and Peko about something,” Hajime said. “Is she here too?”

“Tch.” Fuyuhiko fluffed the shoulders of his pinstripe suit. “Nah. She’s off somewhere else. I don’t know where. She can take care of herself.”

“That she can,” Hajime agreed.

“So? What did you want?”

“Well.” After a brief second of hesitation, Hajime decided to tell him. He could always find Peko later. “I was thinking we could take turns standing guard by the storage room. There are a lot of things in there people could use as weapons.”

“You were talking to Mahiru, weren’t you?” Fuyuhiko faltered a little at her name.

“I—yeah.” That was surprising. “You did too?”

“No, Peko heard it from Hiyoko.” Fuyuhiko answered. “It’s like a game of telephone. A bit ridiculous, huh?” He snorted. “I could talk to Mahiru any time I wanted though. Don’t go getting the wrong idea or anything, bastard.”

Hajime elected to ignore that. “So, what do you think?”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Fuyuhiko said, “but you understand what sort of signal that sends, yeah?”

“Eh? Signal? What do you mean?”

“I mean, posting a sentry out there pretty clearly tells everyone that you don’t trust them,” Fuyuhiko said.

“Ah—!” Hajime hadn’t even considered that. “Does it really?” Having someone out there was meant to protect their safety. All of them. It was definitely a smart move. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized that people could easily see it like that. And posting a guard without telling the others would be even worse.

Fuyuhiko didn’t answer the question. He didn’t have to.

“I think we should do it anyway,” Hajime said after a moment. “We have to make sure everyone knows though. It’s not about distrusting anyone. It would also be useful for keeping an eye out for Monokuma and our captors. Between that and trying to keep us all safe, it really seems like the best course of action.”

“Heh. If you say so, then I guess that’s fine.” Fuyuhiko had a faint air of cockiness in his tone. “So that’s why you wanted to ask me and Peko, yeah?”

“Pretty much,” Hajime admitted.

“You’ve got decent judgement then,” Fuyuhiko said. “Yeah, I guess we could take the first shifts. I mean, I’ll have to ask her, but it’s not like she’s going to say no. So, what? She’s on for three hours, and then me? Something like that? I’m an early riser anyway, so whatever’s fine.”
“That could work for tonight,” Hajime agreed. “If you’re both okay with it. I’d rather you guys get
some sleep as well though. Akane and Nekomaru and Gundham could also take a few shifts. If
they agree. Me too,” he added hastily.

“I told you, it’ll be fine,” Fuyuhiko grumbled. “Quit worrying already.”

“Alright then…” Worry was becoming such a familiar part of his life that Hajime wasn’t sure he
could stop it. “I guess I should let the others know.”

“Tell them they can come to me if they have a problem with it,” Fuyuhiko growled. “I don’t think
anyone will though. We should all know how important it is to work together. So that we don’t…
we don’t have to lose anyone, ya know?”

“Fuyuhiko….” Hajime nodded, setting his jaw in a determined line. “You’re right.”

“Course I’m right,” Fuyuhiko responded. He seemed heartened for a moment. Then his gaze
dropped again. “About this traitor…what do you think?”

“Oh?”

“I mean, I could go around torturing people until someone fesses up.” Fuyuhiko scratched at the
back of his neck. “That’s what woulda happened back home. But doing that now wouldn’t really be
good for morale, ya know?”

“Right,” Hajime agreed quickly. “Let’s not do that.”

“It’s awfully convenient for them though,” the young yakuza continued. “If there were a traitor,
they would basically have everything they wanted. It’ll only take one betrayal before everyone
loses it. Bastards.” He spat a little. “In the meantime, they get us to doubt each other. Of course
they’d say there was a traitor.”

“Hold on,” Hajime said. “Are you saying you think there’s a traitor? Or that you think there isn’t?”

“I’m not sure it matters right now,” Fuyuhiko said.

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“Obviously, it is important,” he explained. “But right now, it’s the effect, right? Whether there is or
isn’t doesn’t change how we view it, right? That possibility will always be there.”

“Ah. Yeah, that is true.” It wasn’t that he hadn’t considered that possibility. But the lack of
answers was beginning to get to him. He’d been trying not to think of Chiaki all the time,
especially since he didn’t really have that luxury in this situation, but seeing her die for being the
traitor…for sacrificing herself. That wasn’t something he wanted to go through again.

“Look,” Fuyuhiko said, sighing. “Try not to worry about it too much. For now, we need to focus on
preventing a murder. Or protecting everyone. Whatever you want to call it.”

Hajime just nodded dumbly.

Fuyuhiko glared at him. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” he said after a moment. “But you
need to pull yourself together.”

“Eh?”

“You’ve been—no, I dunno. Heh.” His single eye rolled over to stare at a corner of the room. “You
were almost like a totally different person at the end of that simulation, you know? And again when you were talking down Mitarai. You’re a good guy, Hajime. Reliable when we need you. So we need you know. You can’t keep getting caught up in all this self-doubting bullshit.” Fuyuhiko rounded off his little speech by jabbing at Hajime with his finger.

“Mahiru said something similar,” Hajime recalled.

“Probably told you to man up.” Fuyuhiko mumbled. “Guess she’s not totally wrong after all. We need you, man.”

Hajime didn’t think he was doing that badly. He didn’t feel anywhere near as self-conscious as he had at the start of their previous killing game. But none of the others seemed to be seeing that. So. Suppressing a retort, he gave a firm nod and turned toward the door. “I’ll talk to the others now then.”

“Hajime.” The way Fuyuhiko said his name was what stopped him, even more so than the fact that he’d said it at all. He glanced back over his shoulder. Fuyuhiko almost seemed to be chewing over the words he wanted to say before finally spitting them out. “Do you think there’s any chance that Komaeda is the traitor?”

“Ah, I thought you said it didn’t matter right now.” Hajime answered. In truth, he thought there was certainly a chance of that. They’d all been making such progress back on the island. But here, in this situation, who knew what could happen? Nagito had seemed kind before. But that had all been front. A deception. A lie. Or maybe it hadn’t been then, but it could be now.

“It doesn’t,” Fuyuhiko grumbled.

Taking his hand off the doorknob, Hajime reluctantly turned around to face Fuyuhiko. “I know you’ve had your difficulties with Komaeda. But we made room for you and Hiyoko to change, yeah? And then again—we gave each other another chance after learning the truth about who we were.” He managed to say that without hesitating, though he still mentally stumbled when he thought of the words ‘Remnants of Despair.’

“That was before we were thrust into another killing game though,” Fuyuhiko countered.

“Just try, alright?” Hajime asked. “I know I am.”

“Humph. Alright.” Fuyuhiko crossed his arms over his chest. “I just worry that we’re giving him too much credit, you know?”

“I’m sure Hiyoko and Mahiru said the same about you.” Hajime returned evenly.

Fuyuhiko scoffed. “Perhaps.” Sliding his hands into his pockets, he sighed again. “Alright. You win. Now get out of here and fill the others in. We’ll make this happen, Hajime.”

“Yeah.” Hajime offered a small smile before opening the door and leaving the room. Once he was standing back in the hallway, he took a deep breath. Alright. Time to start talking to people.

Surprisingly, most of those conversations went smoothly. Almost everyone either agreed immediately or understood fairly quickly.

“Kyahaha!” Hiyoko had thrown her arms in the air when Hajime told her. The gesture did not work as effectively now that she was taller. “Obviously we should do that. Not like I can trust any of you idiots to keep me or Big Sis safe.”
“The vigilance of a sentry may ward off intruders,” Gundham had chuckled, “but no mortal eye can see the next plane. It is there where my thralls herald and harken to me. Such an action would prove no impediment to me. But the rest of you may rejoice in that false sense of security.”

Hajime had no idea whether that meant Gundham supported or opposed the idea.

“I don’t really get it, but it sounds like I’m supposed to beat up anyone I see walking around at night,” Akane had said. A feral grin crossed her face. “Alright! I like this job!”

Sonia had been a little distraught by the idea for precisely the reason Fuyuhiko said, but she came around easily enough. “It is such a shame to doubt our friends,” she had said, “but I understand it is necessary to help keep everyone safe. Very well. I shall do my part.”

When everyone he spoke with had agreed to the idea, Hajime found he could breathe a little easier. Sure, their captors definitely knew about it too. But they couldn’t really do anything to stop them from posting a sentry either. All that remained, then, was to run down the clock. It wasn’t a great solution. It wasn’t even a good one. But it felt their only real shot at getting everyone out of this. Their only real way of stopping a murder.

As aware of that as he was, Hajime still couldn’t shake the feeling he’d gotten earlier. He did feel slightly more confident though, thanks to Ibuki and Fuyuhiko. He told himself that he just needed to talk to Nagito. Nagito was the only person he hadn’t found yet, and he’d be lying to himself if he said that didn’t worry him.

He didn’t even realize he was pacing aimlessly around the lounge until someone called his name. Stopping just before he walked into a pool table, Hajime glanced up. Gundham stood in the doorway, watching him. His scarf draped down toward the floor. Two of his hamsters, one perched on each shoulder, sniffed the air.

“Yeah?” Hajime asked.

Gundham rubbed his finger against one of the hamster’s cheeks. “You fool. I simply called to alert you to my presence. You could have easily been eliminated with your guard down so.”

“I see,” Hajime replied slowly. “Thanks, then.”

“Your thanks is not necessary,” Gundham said. “My subordinates simply directed me to come here. It was merely the will of causality.”

So he was really still talking like that, huh? Well that wasn’t surprising. He kept that up even to his death last time. Hajime had to wonder whether Gundham wrote that way on his blog too. That’s right. Come to think of it, Gundham had promised to show that to him once. But they’d never had a chance on the island. And now….

“Do your hamsters have—?”

“I have no hamsters,” Gundham interrupted. He petted the top of one of their heads—San-D, Hajime guessed, based on the color of its coat. “That is merely the form they assume in order to spare you from the terror of their reality.”

Hajime rolled his eyes. “Do your Four Dark Devas have access to food here?”

“So you are concerned?” Gundham laughed. “You need not fear. Teruteru has arranged to provide my subordinates with all the sustenance they need. The man’s perversions are legendary, but his cooking abilities are far beyond those of a normal mortal’s.”
“Right. Well, that’s good.” Hajime agreed, or at least, he thought he did. “You really do take good care of them.”

“But of course.” Gundham smirked before quickly hiding his mouth behind his scarf. “Still, I thank you.”

“Yeah…don’t mention it.” Maybe he should think about this in a comforting way instead. Like Ibuki, Gundham was retaining his—what did he call it? His own brand of evil. As something familiar to hang onto in all this…whatever this was.

“By the way.” The words came unusually slowly, even for Gundham. “I would like to revisit our plan.”

“Plan?” Hajime blinked. “You mean with the sentry?”

“The other one,” Gundham said.

“The—oh. That one.” He’d been afraid of this too. “Look, Gundham.”

“I have no intention of forcing my morals upon you,” Gundham cut him off. “I simply wished to clarify that I shall not repeat the mistakes of the past. To struggle, and live, is admirable. But it is wiser to struggle with allies than with enemies.”

“Are you saying you won’t kill anyone?” Hajime asked after a moment of trying to link Gundham’s statements to a logical conclusion.

“I simply said that I would temporarily align myself with your plan,” Gundham responded. “That is the extent of my treaty. You would do well to bear witness. Of course, if I decide to get serious, then it will cease mattering at all. The might of my empire cannot be underestimated.”

And they were back to this again. Lovely.

“Right.” Hajime said, trying not to let too much impatience leak into his voice. “Thanks for your cooperation.”

Gundham gave him a long look but said nothing. It got uncomfortable fast.

“What?” Hajime finally snapped.

Gundham touched his earring. His Hell Hound earring. Before he could voice whatever thought occupied his mind, the door to the lounge swung open, and a boisterous laugh entered the room only seconds before Nekomaru did. Nobody followed him in though, so apparently Nekomaru just had a habit of laughing every time he opened a door.

“Mmm! Hajime and Gundham, what a pleasant surprise.” The large man scratched his nose. “Have either of you seen Akane?”

“Her location is a mystery,” Gundham purred. “Perhaps she has learned to conceal herself.”

“I saw her a few minutes ago,” Hajime said. “She was in her room.” Odd that she would suddenly go missing too….

“That’s what I thought,” Nekomaru replied, sighing. The heavy chain—all that for a little whistle, really?—clinked around his neck and shoulders. “But she wasn’t opening the door when I just checked. Perhaps she’s in the gym.”
“Should we really be working out at a time like this?”

“What are you saying?” Nekomaru’s reaction to his question was far stronger than Hajime had expected. Electricity seemed to blaze from the manager’s eyebrows as he stepped forward. “Exercise is essential! It helps release endorphins and reduces stress. It’s an excellent coping mechanism for many people. Hahaha!” He pounded his chest. “And it helps you get in shape too!”

Was he—being called out of shape? Sure, he hadn’t hit the gym in a few days, but he was still fit.

“Well said. Indeed. That was a wonderful line.” Gundham chuckled. “Training is one of the only ways you measly mortals can increase your power output. But no matter how much you do so, you shall never rise to my stature.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Nekomaru said. Surprisingly, there was no sign of a smile or even a smirk on his face. Instead he looked deep in thought, one meaty hand covering most of his chin.

“Hmmhmhmhm. Hahahaha. FUHAHAHA!” Gundham threw back his head and laughed. Hajime might even have called it a demonic or evil laugh, except that he’d heard Nagito give that kind of laugh before. Gundham’s didn’t even come close. “You were a robot at the time. That allowed you to transcend your mortal chains.”

“Exactly!” Nekomaru roared. “Well, to the robot thing anyway. That was definitely an upgrade in many ways. I could produce soda and tea from my eyes!”

Hajime did not think that that particular feature was really the upgrade that mattered….

“Besides.” Nekomaru scoffed. “There’s more to fighting than pure power. You must put your heart, your soul, no, your very essence into fighting! That is the only way to truly transcend your limits. That is how you make the impossible possible!”

Hajime inched toward the door. Why was he getting caught up in a loud argument about fighting? Or perhaps it wasn’t even really an argument, because a moment later, Gundham gave another low chuckle. “You were indeed a worthy opponent, Nekomaru. I look forward to fighting this mastermind together with you.”

“Alright!” Nekomaru marched toward him. “Indeed! We must be at our absolute best!”

The two grasped each other’s hands in a firm handshake. Or a small-scale war. Either way.

“By the way,” Hajime heard Nekomaru say as he slipped through the door, “I’ll have to do ‘it’ to you. Think of it as a way to strengthen yourself even more!”

“If there anyone who could break through my automated forcefield, I suppose it would be you, Nekomaru.”

After that, their voices became too muffled to make out behind the closed door. As for Akane…she was a capable fighter, so he wasn’t too worried, but it probably be a good idea to find out where she was anyway. Nagito too. There weren’t a ton of places to hide around here. Or they could be asleep in their rooms. That was a possibility. Hajime didn’t think it was that late, but of course, they had no real way of knowing. Teruteru had made them all a nice dinner a while ago, and they were both there then, eating their usual amounts.

Emerging back in the central hallway, he decided to check the gym first since it was closest. The moment he opened the door, noise filled his ears. One of the treadmills was racing, moving so
quickly that Hajime felt certain the belt would break off any moment. Akane sprinted on it, chest heaving, arms rising and falling with her movements. Dark, wet spots had sprouted over her clothes, which clung tightly to her skin.

“Oi!” She shouted, her voice somehow rising over the whine of the treadmill. “Shut the door! It’s drafty!”

Hajime pushed the door closed with his foot. He’d just noticed the other person standing in the room. Nagito.

“Hey, Hinata!” The other boy delivered a friendly smile. “Isn’t Owari incredible? She takes her training so seriously, you know.”

“The only reason I said you could stay was ‘cause you said you were gonna be quiet!” Akane said. She didn’t sound the least bit winded. Somehow.

“Ahaha, you’re right.” Nagito folded his arms across his chest.

Hajime looked from the exercising Akane over to Nagito. “You were already in here? Doing what?”

“Hmm? Exploring.” Nagito looked a little surprised. “I haven’t really had the chance to check out this room yet. It seems a little weird to me that they gave us a gym.”

“They put in a snow room, and the gym is what strikes you as weird?” Hajime asked.

“I think it’s great!” Akane exclaimed. “It lets me get all pumped up to fight Coach Nekomaru!”

“Don’t you mean the mastermind?” Hajime corrected.

“I can do both!” Without breaking stride, Akane shot him a quick grin.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

“By the way, Hinata.” Nagito spoke up again, leaning against the back wall. “Owari mentioned something about guard duty?”

“Oh, right. I was looking for you to tell you.” Hajime filled him in on the plan to set up shifts for people to monitor the central hallway and especially the storage room. “So,” he finished up, “if we post someone right outside the storage room, they can monitor almost everything and guard the weapons in the storage room.”

“I see.” Nagito held his chin in his thumb and pointer finger as he nodded. “What a spectacular plan! Truly befitting someone like yourself, Hinata. I think it’s a wonderful idea.”

And that meant everyone had agreed to it. He could take a sigh of relief. Mentally of course. Except—why did Nagito agree? At first he’d thought that Nagito disagreeing would be worse, but now he wasn’t sure. It wasn’t like he’d wanted another ‘strengthening your hopes’ monologue but…well, he didn’t want something else to make him feel even more off-balance.

Off-balance. Yes, that was a good word for it. It frustrated him in a way he didn’t really know how to express. He only knew it frustrated him. All of the progress they’d made was trickling, slowly but steadily, and he didn’t know how to stop it. How was he supposed to trust Nagito now? The scars of the other killing game were still too fresh. And they didn’t have Chiaki to rally around this time. It was all up to him.
“Hey.” Akane interjected. “If you two are going to yap it up, could ya do it somewhere else?”

“Hmm? Yeah. Sorry.” Hajime said sheepishly. He turned back and opened the door. “Komaeda?”

“Coming.” Nagito brushed down his coat and walked out after Hajime. The moment the door was closed, the noisy groan of the treadmill disappeared with it. Nagito sighed and stretched out his limbs. The metal hand creaked slightly, and he lowered it again, studying it with a blank face. “I’m flattered you wanted to spend more time with me, Hinata,” he murmured. “Things have become a little tricky lately. But I think being able to believe in each other like that is a truly wonderful thing.”

He spoke with his usual reverence, which only succeeded in sending another chill down Hajime’s spine. His voice was always so soft, but so…raspy, really. He praised things in a way which sounded as if he meant something else entirely. Or maybe Hajime was reading too much into it.

“Komaeda….” He pushed those thoughts out of his head. They weren’t important right now. What he needed to do instead was keep an open mind and work to keep everyone safe. “If you have some kind of plan, I want you to tell me about it. Alright?”

“What kind of plan would I have, Hinata?” Nagito asked. “You’re the one with the plan. Guard duty and that last resort. It may not be perfect, but there aren’t many other options left to us.”

“Don’t be coy.” Hajime chided. “You know what I mean.”

“Ah.” Nagito gave a long, slow sigh. “I’ve told you before, haven’t I? You don’t need to worry about trash like me. There’s no way I could ever—”

“We both know that isn’t true.” Hajime cut him off. “I don’t want to have to keep an eye on you until the deadline, but I will if I have to.”

“I would hate to be a burden on you like that.” Nagito responded. “Look, Hinata. Whatever decision you and the others make, I’ll accept. I didn’t expect them to cut off our bathroom access though. That was rather unlucky.”

Hajime had managed to avoid thinking about that until this moment. Suddenly his bladder ached, reminding him that he’d needed to pee for hours.

“Unlucky,” he repeated through clenched teeth, more from trying to suppress his bodily urges than from any real anger. “That reminds me. This whole situation….” He trailed off as he revised himself mid-thought.

“Yes?” Nagito pressed.

“You would consider this…good luck, wouldn’t you?” He asked, but he felt he already knew the answer.

So he was surprised when Nagito shook his head.

“Why?” He asked after waiting for an elaboration that never came. “I thought—with the last one—”

This time, Nagito’s sigh marked clear disappointment. A wave of anger crashed over Hajime, and he quickly slid his hands into his jeans to avoid lashing out at something. This side of Nagito infuriated him, possibly more than anything else—though he wouldn’t place any bets on that.
“Forget it,” he muttered. “I can’t make you tell me.”

“Yeah,” Nagito agreed.

Silence.

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you do whatever you want,” Hajime said.

“Ah, well, I thought you might say something like that. But are you sure that’s a good idea?” Nagito asked. “I thought we agreed to believe in everyone.”

That stopped Hajime cold. “I do,” he said in a voice that was barely more than a whisper. “I’m trying. I want to trust you, Komaeda. I really do.”

“Do you?” Nagito hummed. “I wouldn’t want to trust someone like me.”

Great. Thanks for that. “I thought we were making progress on stopping the self-deprecation.” Then again, he thought they were making progress on trust too.

Nagito managed a hoarse laugh. “If the Ultimate Hope can doubt himself, I suppose it would be normal for anyone. So normal, so painfully boring.” One by one, the artificial fingers on his limb folded into a fist. “Maybe I should consider this good luck after all.” His gaze flickered up to Hajime. “It’s weird with you.”

Hajime scoffed. “Thanks. What does that even mean?”

“Just what I said.” Nagito blinked. “Haha, I guess that doesn’t make a lot of sense, huh? I’ve told you before, you know. You shouldn’t take me so seriously.”

Hajime’s head began aching, and he was pretty sure it had nothing to do with a growing need to find a bathroom. His frustration continued mounting. Helpless in their own situation, backsliding in his relationships—he took a deep breath. This was difficult, but it was also the future they’d chosen. Well, alright, not this specifically, but he couldn’t keep complaining now. That wouldn’t solve anything.

“Look, Komaeda.” He fixed his gaze on the other boy, hoping it affected him as much as it did himself—with that red orb blazing in there, he still had trouble facing himself in a mirror. “Promise me you won’t kill anyone, alright? Including yourself. Not for the sake of hope—not for anything.”

“Mmm.” Nagito wrapped his coat a little more tightly around himself. “You would trust my word?”

Hajime didn’t back down. “Yes.”


There was no sign of deceit there. Just pure sincerity. The rest of his face looked soft and open. In fact, looking closely, Nagito looked a little frailer than usual. Not anywhere near as bad as he had been with the Despair Disease, but his already pale skin was even paler than normal.

“Are you alright?” Hajime asked, reaching out. Nagito didn’t move, so Hajime raised the back of his hand to Nagito’s forehead. It wasn’t hot, so he didn’t have a fever. That much was good. He didn’t want any of them to go through that again.

“Fine,” Nagito said. “You shouldn’t worry about me, Hinata. There’s already enough going on for
everyone to think about.”

That was a bit of an understatement, but Hajime gave a curt nod in recognition.

“I think you should get some rest,” Nagito advised, wrapping his coat around himself. “It’s getting late anyway.”

“Yeah. Maybe. I should make sure Fuyuhiko’s told Peko about our plan. She’s on the first shift tonight.”

“Ah, Pekoyama is so reliable!” Nagito cooed. “Who else is on there?”

“Well, it’s her, then Fuyuhiko, then Nekomaru, then Gundham, and then me,” Hajime recounted. “That should be fine for tonight. That way, everyone can get at least a little sleep.”

“Ah, you’re so considerate,” Nagito purred. “Make sure you do get some sleep then.” He brushed past Hajime, pulling open the door to the dorm hallway. “Coming?”

“Yeah….”

As Hajime followed Nagito in, he spotted Peko emerging from her own room. The swordswoman pulled her door closed and glanced up at them. Her red eyes softened behind her glasses. “Hajime and Nagito. I am pleased to see you both safe.”

“Yeah, you too.” Hajime said. “Has Fuyuhiko filled you in?”

“Indeed.” She locked her fingers together. “I believe it is a wise plan. Growing up in the world I did, I learned it was always best not to take chances. It is important for all of us to respect each other, but it is also important for everyone to stay safe.”


Peko shot him a quick glance before refocusing on Hajime. “I shall attend my duties,” she said with her usual intensity. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Peko set off down the hall. Hajime watched her for a few seconds before turning toward Nagito. “Good night to you as well.”

“Mhm.” Nagito smiled. “Sleep well!”

As he returned to his dark and cramped room, Hajime was torn between throwing himself on the bed and finding somewhere to relieve himself. He recalled the bucket in the storage room. But—no. He couldn’t risk putting back one of the weapons just for that. Although if Peko was guarding the room, and they were all switching off, then maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Alternatively, though, he could try to sleep. That would probably be the safer option.

Slipping out of his shoes, socks, and tie, Hajime flopped down on the bed. Lumpy and squeaky… getting a proper rest was unlikely. Well, that probably wouldn’t have happened regardless. The aching sense from his lower regions grew, and he rolled over on it, nestling his head against the pillow. After a moment, he kicked his jeans off, letting them crumple to the floor. If he managed to fall asleep, then he could take his mind off all this for a little while. He had a few hours before Gundham was supposed to come wake him up. As long as all those crazy dreams with Monokuma didn’t start up again….
With that sobering thought, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

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“Wow. He’s a bit of a wet blanket, isn’t he?” Junko cackled. “Jeez, Izuru, you should have tried to come inside me instead. That would have been much more entertaining. Plus, you know, I wouldn’t slip into these boring spells of anxiety all the time. You know how basically everyone on the Internet is a socially anxious loser battling depression? He’s like that.”

“…” For his own part, Izuru was characteristically silent. He sat on a desk, one foot planted on its wooden surface, the other dangling limply over the floor. His dull red eyes stared out at Junko as if she were a mildly interesting television program.

“Yeah, yeah, I know you think he’s interesting or whatever because he can fart deus ex machinas.” Junko waved a hand before her face. “But the only reason he could do that was because I was bound by the game’s script and he wasn’t. Geez, I never thought being a dead AI could be so limiting.”

“…”

“Oh, well. I predicted things would more or less turn out this way. In fact, this is even better than the Future Foundation’s punishment time, don’t you think? A second killing game involving the survivors of an earlier one? Ohaha, it’s so despairful! Well…I guess that’s not entirely true.”

“Junko.”

“Hmm? Izuru, are you finally going to confess your love?” Junko clasped her hands together near her head and swayed from side to side. “Oh, what a world, what a world!”

“…”

“Come on now. Don’t go back to giving me the silent treatment. Pleeeeeease?”

“…”

“God, you are such a buzzkill.” Junko rested her chin on her fists. “You have to admit that it’s realllllly boring. Oh, I’m not gonna kill anyone! Please!” She cackled. “Everyone always says the same thing over and over. Even when you do get someone who wants the killing to kick off, they’re always only doing it so they can try and get the better of you. As if that were possible.” She swung her legs out like a child on a swing. “Come on! Kill someone already!”

“You’re growing boring, Junko.”

Junko clasped her heart theatrically. “Ah! I’d be hurt if I felt you really meant that.”

Izuru stared at her from beneath the long, quivering trails of his hair. “You’re also able to analyze sequences several steps in advance. You must know how this is likely to end.”

“We were both wrong before.” Junko grinned. “Learning from your mistakes is so passé, but you know…you can learn something from them. Wouldn’t it be interesting if we were right this time? Wouldn’t it be interesting if we weren’t? Isn’t that why you didn’t stop it?”
Izuru stayed silent again, neither confirming nor denying that accusation.

“Or,” Junko continued undeterred, “maybe you saw an opportunity. You lucky duck.”

“....”

“You’d be right though.” Brushing her hair back over her shoulder, Junko filled the room with another wide, catlike grin. “Despair is always an opportunity.”

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...

When he awoke, suddenly and abruptly in the darkness, Hajime’s first instinct was not to return to sleep. The normal drowsiness accompanying such an awakening was nowhere to be found. Instead he felt worse than he had in a while. Even the simple act of taking a breath felt absurdly difficult. It was like he was on top of a mountain where the air was thin. He sat up. His sheets were wet, and for a moment, he thought something awful had happened—but no, it was just sweat. It coated his whole body. He kicked out until the sheets finally slid off him. Almost immediately, a sharp pain emanated from his groin, making him regret the movement. His bladder felt like it might explode.

Scrambling up, he hurried over to the furthest corner of his room and relieved himself. In the moment, relief washed away any sense of shame. The trembling in his limbs eased. He did his best to ignore the awful sound he made as the liquid sloshed against the floor. It was probably too small a thing to be considered luck, but none of it splashed on him.

Hajime staggered back toward the bed. He’d intended to collapse on it again and return to sleep. How much time was left before his shift? Even the Monopads didn’t display the current time. What a joke. Without any way to tell...he stared at the dark mass that was his ceiling. The only light in his room came from the crack under his door. Supporting himself with the bed, Hajime knelt down and looked beneath it. The knife lay exactly where he’d left it. And the saw—his heart sank. The saw was gone.

He shot up so fast that he nearly rammed his head against the bed. He knew he hadn’t misplaced the saw. It should have still been here. The door was still locked, so no one could have crept in while he was asleep. Hajime rapidly dressed himself and entered the hallway. Glancing along the other doors, it looked like the others were all asleep. At the very least, nobody was in the hall. Hajime thought about waking a few of them up but decided to go check with the guard first. Peko, Fuyuhiko, Nekomaru, Gundham—it could have been any of them.

As he stepped into the main hallway, though, an invisible hand constricted his heart even further. There was no one standing guard outside the storage room. In fact, there was no one in this room at all. Grappling with the rising fear, Hajime dashed into the storage room and took a quick look around. There was nobody there either. In fact, the room looked almost exactly the same.

“Hello?” Hajime called once, and then again, louder. The lack of response only heightened his worry.

Running to the closest door, he threw it open. Immediately the grating whine of a treadmill filled his ears. Akane was running. Large sweat-stains caused her clothes to huddle close to her body, accentuating her form.

“Akane?” Hajime asked, coming to a stop. “Have—have you been in here the whole time?”
“Eh? I can’t hear you.” She pressed the stop button on the machine, and the treadmill wound down, thankfully taking the noise with it. “What?” She asked, turning toward him and picking up a rag which she used to mop her forehead.

“I asked if you’ve been in here the whole time,” Hajime repeated.

“Nah.” Akane set a hand on her hip. “I couldn’t sleep, so I came back in here. Why? Did you wanna work out too?”

“No, I just—listen, Akane.” He didn’t have time for this. “Did anyone come in here? Besides me, I mean?”

“Mmm.” Akane’s face appeared to crumple and contort as she thought. “Yeah. Mikan stopped by briefly.”

“Mikan? Why? What did she want?” Realizing how crazy he was starting to sound, Hajime forced himself to take several deep breaths.

Akane shrugged. “I dunno.”

“You don’t….” He shook his head. “Look, just come on.”

As he left the gym, the door to the café opened, and Twogami waddled out. He held a small bowl filled with some of the leftover chicken pieces from dinner in his hands. He stopped upon seeing Hajime and Akane emerge from the gym. “Ah! You two shouldn’t be wandering around so late.”

Did he really just try and say that? “Same to you,” Hajime countered. “What are you doing anyway?”

“I got hungry,” Twogami replied, slightly lifting the bowl. “What about you two?”

“Never mind that,” Hajime said impatiently. “Look, have you seen anyone else while you were here? Like—one of the people who was supposed to be on guard duty?”

“Who would that list be?” Twogami asked.

“Peko, Fuyuhiko, Nekomaru, Gundham, and myself,” Hajime recounted.

Twogami thought for a moment before shaking his head. “Sorry. I don’t recall seeing anyone else in the kitchen.”

No one there, either? What was going on? It wasn’t like any of the people they’d picked as a guard would just go to sleep. What about Endirya? Maybe he had something to do with it. Come to think of it, Hajime hadn’t seen him around either.

“Come on,” Hajime said, already heading out. Aside from the hall leading back to the dorms, the only rooms left in the main hall were the locked door and the painted hall leading to the snow room. So he headed to the last one.

“Hajime, what’s going on?” Twogami demanded as he clomped after him.

“Seriously,” Akane agreed. “I don’t really get it.”

Hajime stopped outside the snow room. Nobody had been in the hallway, and he hoped nobody was in here either. He tried to open the door. It didn’t budge.
What? That couldn’t be right. He tried again. Still nothing.

“What are you doing?” Akane asked. “Just open the door already.”

“It’s locked!” Hajime exclaimed. Not only that—the handle felt cool to the touch. Very cool. Downright cold, in fact. Sure, this was a snow room, but it hadn’t been this cold before. It wasn’t just the handle either – he felt cold air blowing in through the cracks in the door.

“What do you mean, locked? Let me see!” Twogami nudged him aside with surprising flexibility as he tried moving the handle. “It gives a little,” he mused, before abruptly slamming his shoulder into the door.

“Hey!” Hajime shouted, but Twogami ignored him and rammed it again. Both he and Akane rushed forward to help. “On three!”

“One!”

“Two!”

“Three!”

All of them slammed into the door. There was a faint splintering sound which Hajime hoped didn’t belong to any of them. It must have been part of the door though because the next time they rammed the door, it flew open. The three nearly stumbled and fell into the room. Fortunately, Twogami’s girth proved resistant enough to handle both of them toppling into him.

Don’t let this be like the music venue, Hajime thought over and over. Don’t let this be like the music venue. Please, please, don’t let this be happening again.

Once again, it seemed their wishes were in vain.

Snow howled out of the room. There was a lot of it. Way more than Hajime remembered. He couldn’t even see anything through the blizzard-like conditions. His hair and shirt had already accumulated a small, white layer. Twogami and Akane were no better. A strange droning sound filled the room, not at all like the whistling wind in a blizzard. He was pretty sure the snow machines were responsible.

Moving deeper into the room, using his hands to shield his face, Hajime desperately searched for something, anything amiss. Even more desperately, he hoped not to find it.

There, laying in the red-stained snow, clothes drooping and heavy and partially concealed beneath a blanket of white, with his skin a motley, sunken blue lay the body of Nekomaru Nidai.

Number of Students: 15

https://maxpeirce.tumblr.com/post/170238770385/a-map-of-the-first-floor-where-the-x-represents

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading! I'm blessed to have had so many of you stick with this for so long. You all are the main reason I keep going with this! So thank you! :) Also as always, feel free to let me know your thoughts.
I've also included a link to a (poorly made) floor map for those of you who are interested in visualizing what it looks like. It's at the end of the section.

Can't wait to see you all in the next chapter!
Hajime wanted to reject reality. This reality. The idea that Nekomaru Nidai could be laying in the snow, dead. Again. That was too absurd to be real. Even in a world where the strange and obscene gradually became normalized, this was too far. It had to be a lie. It had to be a lie. It had to be. Because if it wasn’t, then that meant one of them had killed…had killed Nekomaru.

And then the familiar bing-bong-bong-bong sound crashed against his ears. He knew, somewhere, that Monokuma was giving his usual body discovery announcement. It was happening all over again.

Maybe it was the cold. Maybe it wasn’t. But Hajime felt numb. Like he’d been frozen in place. Ice had frozen not just his limbs but his heart and brain too. Somebody screamed, but his ears refused to register who. It might have been one minute. Or ten. Or thirty. But eventually, Hajime realized that, even through the hail of snow, there was a flurry of activity around him. Someone must have gone and told the others.

“AAAAAAAAARGH!” Another scream—this time, he recognized it as Kazuichi.

“It’s a lie, right? Neh? Neh? A lie!” Teruteru shivered so badly that it was a small miracle he could stand straight.

“Nekomaru! It can’t be!” Mahiru gasped, hiding her mouth behind her hands.

“Nyeh? The big guy can’t really be dead, yeah?” Hiyoko peered around Mahiru. “Stop making shit up.”

The other outbursts were similar expressions of disbelief. Anger. Regret. Sorrow. Confusion.

“Oi.” Akane had fallen to her knees near the body. “Coach Nekomaru…what is this?”

That’s right. Akane. As stunned as Hajime felt, this had to be way worse for her. How many times would she lose Nekomaru? Would they all lose Nekomaru? After everything they’d done to save their friends, to keep living on together, for something like this to happen—it wasn’t right.

Especially not someone like Nekomaru. Someone who wanted the best for everyone, who wanted to ensure that there wouldn’t be any more victims.

A dull pain spread through his hand, and he realized he was digging his nails into his palm. He focused on that, letting the pain pull him back to reality. They couldn’t stand around grieving or thinking about how unfair it all was. Because the nightmare wasn’t going to wait.

As if waiting for that, Monokuma waddled into the room.

“Jeez, everyone looks so depressed in here,” he announced. “Y’all should cheer up. I brought you a present.”

“Nobody wants a present from you!” Kazuichi screeched. “Just bring Nekomaru back.”

“Hmm?” Monokuma looked confused—as confused as a robotic teddy bear could look.
“Put him in a robot body again!” Kazuichi demanded. “Just, just, bring him back!”

Monokuma laughed. “That is impossible!”

“Indeed,” Peko agreed, lacing one finger through the red bow around her neck. “Death is final.”

“Mhm! Mhm.” Ibuki nodded. “People die when they are killed.”

“In the real world, anyway,” Twogami said.

Ryota was hiding behind the Ultimate Imposter’s girth. He peered out from behind his waist now, wide eyes staring at Nekomaru’s body in horror. “But why…?” He managed. “Why him?”

“That’s something you’ll have to find out in the trial.” A new voice said. Hajime turned to see Endirya entering the room. Immediately several flakes of snow from the still-heavy snow machines landed in his hair. He ignored this. “Monokuma, just hurry up and give it to them.”

“Roger that!” Monokuma spun around in a small circle. ‘Ta-da! Check your Monopads, everyone. It’s…the Monokuma File! Be sure to use that and investigate to your heart’s content! You’ve all gotta find that blackened killer among you, after all. Upupupu! Such heart-pounding excitement! I can’t wait!”

“You…!” Akane got to her feet. Her hair rose up, and her hands almost seemed to turn into something closer to claws as she glared at Monokuma and Endirya. “Which one of you was it, huh?” She stared at Endirya and then Monokuma. “He doesn’t have any fighting potential, so it must be you! Well I’ll take you on!”

“You sure about that?” Monokuma cackled.

“Akane, no—!” Hajime began, but Akane cut him off.

“Dammit!” She swore. “I know. I know I can’t fight you the way I want.” Saying that angered her so much that she started shaking. “But I will beat you!” She pointed at Monokuma, snow whirling around her. “With all my spirit and all my ability, I will absolutely beat you!”

“O-Owari-san,” Mikan stuttered out.

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.” Monokuma waved dismissively. “Go hop back into whatever Shounen manga you escaped from. For the rest of you, you’d better get investigating! Time’s-a-ticking! Me, I’ve got a courtroom to set up!” Cackling once again, Monokuma waddled out of the room.

Akane stood there, shoulders heaving, glaring at the spot where Monokuma had stood.

Gundham walked over to stand next to her. “Your words are fine indeed,” he purred. “Very well! I shall lend you my power in the battle to come.”

Hajime’s grip tightened on his Monopad. This wasn’t the time to worry about Akane. He had to find the truth. For everyone’s sake. Turning on the Monopad, he opened up the Monokuma File.

**Monokuma File #1**

The victim is Nekomaru Nidai.

The body was discovered shortly before 4 am in the Snow Room. Its right hand has been severed, and the coloring on the skin and face is consistent with oxygen deprivation.
Truth Bullet #1 Obtained: Monokuma File

Was...was that all?

Hajime read it over again. And then a third time. Yep, that was everything. So it was like this again. Barely any information to go on—if anything, it was the opposite. Just more questions, more and more, falling over him like snow.

“Can someone turn off the snow machines?” Hajime asked. His voice, whisper-quiet, barely passed his lips. He cleared his throat and repeated himself, louder this time.

“Ugh!” Ibuki jumped, swiping at the ceiling. “I can’t! They’re too high!”

“Fuahahaha! Impudent mortals.” Gundham stretched out his arm. One of his hamsters scurried up into his palm. He gave it a boost, and the hamster leapt onto one of the ceiling beams. Chittering, it scurried over to the first snow machine and pushed its nose against the button. The snow storming out slowed to a gentle flurry. The hamster hurried over to the second and then the third snow machines to do the same. Gundham watched it with a look of slight satisfaction on his face. There was a rare softness in his expression that, even under these circumstances, Hajime couldn’t help but respect.

“Why was the snow like that?” Hiyoko asked. “Who would want to hang out in a winter wonderland like that? Sounds lame. And cold, too. Which is even lamer.”

“Do you think so?” Sonia asked sadly. She wiped her eye with the back of her hand. “Back in my kingdom, the winters would often get so chilly that the—”

“No one asked you, you dumb hick!” Hiyoko scoffed. “The cold sucks, and anyone who likes it sucks too.” Her lower lip quivered, and she looked away. “It’s just awful.” She poked at a patch of snow with her toe. “Even the snowwoman Mahiru and I built is gone now.”

Hajime stayed quiet. He knew both Hiyoko and Sonia were trying to distract themselves from what had happened, but thinking about it seriously, it was a good question. Why had the snow been like that? He knew it hadn’t been earlier. So between then and now, had someone turned up the snow machines’ setting? For what reason?

Truth Bullet #2 Obtained: Snow Machines

Hajime glanced briefly at the body and then away again. He wasn’t ready to look there. It was like Twogami all over again, except this time...this wasn’t the Neo World Program. They weren’t here to be rehabilitated.

“Hajime, over here!” Peko called. “Watch your step though.”

“Eh?” He did as she said, despite not getting it. “What’d you find, Peko?”

“There.” She pointed.

Hajime followed her finger to the floor. Looked like a bunch of snow to him. No, wait. Hang on a sec. He crouched down, reaching out. His finger came in contact with something cold and wet. “That’s—” Yeah, there was no mistaking it. There was a gigantic hole in the ice. With water beneath it. Someone had shattered the ice sealing off the lake—or had someone fallen?

“I did not want to call too many people to this spot,” Peko explained. “Not all at once, anyway.”
“Right, the ice.” Hajime pressed it experimentally with his foot. “It isn’t breaking anywhere else. It doesn’t even feel all that thin. I doubt this spot just happened to have thinner ice than the rest of the room.”

“Mmm, I agree.” Peko folded her arms. “I suspect this was intentional. Nekomaru may have been drowned.”

“It is weird that the Monokuma file didn’t say that though,” Hajime muttered, more to himself than her. Why had the ice been broken at all then? It must have been deliberate, right?

“It’s not just that either.” Peko pointed. “Look closely.”

Hajime obliged, staring intently at the water. Dark and cold, mostly, but…wait. He squinted harder. “Is that blood?”

“That was what I thought too,” Peko said. “Normally it would have diluted in water, but there’s no current here. It’s possible that that and the ice helped keep it visible.”

“You might be right.” Hajime said. In any case, it was definitely worth noting.

Truth Bullet #3 Obtained: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet #4 Obtained: Bloody Water

“Peko, you didn’t see anything strange on your shift, right?” Hajime asked her, standing up and taking a few steps away from the hole. Just in case.

“I did not.” she said. “Everything was normal. Although, I did take Fuyuhiko’s shift as well. He may scold me for that later, but I could not bring myself to wake him up.” The expression on her face softened a little as her usually stern features relaxed. “And I was not feeling tired.”

“So….” Hajime furrowed his brows. “That means you did two shifts. And you didn’t see anyone during that time?”

She shook her head. “Not until I knocked on Nekomaru’s room to fetch him.”

“Ah!” That’s right. If she’d taken Fuyuhiko’s shift, that meant she might have been the last person to see Nekomaru. “And he was there?”

“Indeed he was.” Peko nodded. “He went out into the hall. I watched him do it before rejoining my young master.” She hesitated. “If I hadn’t done that…if I’d pushed myself to stay on for a third shift, then maybe—”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Hajime interrupted. “You had no way of knowing any of this would happen. But I need to ask you something. How long ago was this?”

Peko frowned, pushing her hair back. “I can’t give you an exact estimate. I did fall asleep, and we have no way of telling time in here.” She folded her arms across her chest, giving Hajime her usual intense stare. “I would guess that a few hours passed though. Maybe two or three.”

“Thanks,” Hajime said. Sure, it was a rough guess, but that was better than nothing.

Truth Bullet #5 Obtained: Peko’s Account

There were still several people standing around. Hajime listened in on a nearby conversation.
“—can’t leave the body alone,” Mahiru was saying. “Akane and I can guard it fine. That’s…that’s all I can do. And I don’t think Akane will—”

“But I don’t wanna go wandering around alone with a killer on the loose!” Hiyoko whined. “If they were strong enough to beat Nekomaru—”

“None of us should be traveling alone,” Twogami interrupted. “Everyone should at least investigate in pairs. It’s safer that way.”

“Don’t worry, Miss Sonia!” Kazuichi added. “I’ll keep you safe.”

Sonia and Gundham were exiting the room together. Neither seemed to have heard.

“Just let it go already,” Hiyoko sniffed. “Jeez, you’re such a loser.”

“It was a joke,” Kazuichi rubbed the back of his head, looking away. “Just trying to lighten the mood a little. Calm down, will ya?” He stared at the lightly falling snow, as if afraid to look at either them or the body.

“Anyway.” Twogami pushed his glasses further up his nose. “I asked Sonia and Gundham to check the dining hall. I was in the kitchen earlier, so that should be fine, but they’ll check there too. Hiyoko and Kazuichi, I’d like you two to check the storage room. See if anything’s gone missing from there. Ryota, Ibuki, and I will begin searching people’s rooms.”

“What?” Kazuichi exclaimed?

“Hey! That’s our private stuff!” Mahiru protested.

“You can’t just burst in there,” Teruteru chimed in, joining the conversation.

“I don’t want to go with that wimp,” Hiyoko said. “And yeah, no more lolicons get to wander around my room anymore!”

“You’re not even a loli anymore!” Kazuichi jabbed his finger at her. “And who are you calling a wimp?”

Twogami seemed to have expected an outburst like this. He barely even flinched. “Ah, Teruteru. I’d like you to check the lounge. Frankly, I don’t trust you to inspect any of the women’s—in actually, any of the rooms—in a satisfactory manner.”

“Well, that’s a bit rude,” Teruteru murmured, stroking his chin. “But alright, alright. I’d much rather check the kitchens though. That would be a mighty fine place to investigate.”

“Mahiru, do you think you could go with him?” Twogami turned to her. “I don’t think he’ll be able to push you around. As Teruteru opened his mouth, presumably to make another lewd comment, Twogami swiveled his neck around to glare at him. “We don’t have time for this nonsense,” he spat. “Nekomaru is dead. We need to learn what happened.”

“O-okay.” Mahiru nodded and wobbled out of the room. She seemed to be in shock. Teruteru scampered after her, and a moment later, Kazuichi and Hiyoko departed as well. Whether they were leaving to investigate or leaving to distance themselves from having to see Nekomaru’s body…no, thinking this way wasn’t healthy.

The Imposter cast a suspicious glance over at Endirya before swiveling around to look at Hajime. “I doubt there’ll be anything in the gym, but perhaps you and Nagito could check there?”
“Yeah, maybe.” Hajime brushed that aside. Twogami. Ryota.” He made an effort to stay relaxed, or at least to look relaxed, as he spoke. “I don’t suppose either of you saw anything?”

“Mmm.” Ryota shook his head.

“I wish I had.” Twogami crossed his arms. “Nonetheless, I will find the truth. That I promise.”

“You went to the kitchen though,” Hajime said slowly. “Did you see anyone standing guard at the time?”

Twogami huffed. “That doesn’t matter right now. Let’s focus on figuring out what happened first.”

“Yeah…I guess you’re right.” He wanted to press the matter further, but they could use the trial for that. Instead, Hajime knew that he’d been putting this off long enough. Bidding farewell to Twogami, Ryota, and Ibuki, he walked over to Nekomaru’s body. His feet moved limply, slowly, shuffling through the snow.

Fuyuhiko, Nagito, and Mikan were all already there. Akane was too, but she was just staring down at Nekomaru’s body, as if she couldn’t bring herself to believe it.

“Can’t believe someone could kill this bastard,” Fuyuhiko was in the middle of saying. “I mean, I know Gundham managed it before, in the simulation, but that was only because he had this big red button as a weakness. No way something like that would happen here.”

“To lose someone as strong as Nidai….” Nagito looked at a spot a few feet away from the corpse. “So strong, so talented. He was good at helping keep everyone together. Always full of passion and ready to help however he could. It’s so terrible.”

“Watch your mouth,” Fuyuhiko growled. “You probably had something to do with this.”

“Huh? You think so?” Nagito shifted into a resigned expression. “Well, that is completely understandable.”

Hajime ignored both of them and squatted down next to Mikan. “Found anything?” He asked kindly. He wanted to ask her what she’d been doing in the gym, but it was probably better to let her focus on the autopsy for now.

Mikan sniffed. “Well, the cold means I can’t get an accurate time of death. I’m sorry! I’m sorry I’m so useless!”

“No, no, you’re not,” Hajime reassured her quickly. “I kinda figured that would be the case.” As he said that, he tried not to remember the heater running in the music venue and Ibuki’s hanging… well, Too late.

“I’m pretty sure he drowned though,” Mikan said. “The bluing of his skin and his heavy clothes suggest that he was underwater. There’s even some ice beginning to form over his clothes, so…he might have been out here for a little while.”

**Truth Bullet #6 Obtained: Autopsy Report**

**Truth Bullet #7 Obtained: Blued Skin**

“There’s also all the blood,” Mikan continued. “Though I guess that might be obvious, huh?”

Hajime looked. There was indeed a lot of blood around the body. Most of it seemed to flow from
one place. Nekomaru’s…his right hand was missing. Just like the file said. Hajime cast a quick
look around, as if the hand would just be sitting out in the open for him to find. It wasn’t. And that
wasn’t all. The wristband had disappeared too.

**Truth Bullet #8 Obtained: Missing Hand**

**Truth Bullet #9 Obtained: Missing Wristband**

“I’m sorry.” Mikan said again. “I know none of this is very helpful. I’ll keep working though!”

“You’ve been great so far,” Hajime told her. “The thought of investigating our friend like this…of
doing this again…I’m glad you’re here for that. I’m not sure I could have done it myself,” he
added with a sheepish smile.

His gaze landed on Nekomaru’s unmoving chest. His face. Eyes closed like he was asleep. His hair
hung in matted clumps near his head. The whistle and chain hanging around his neck were largely
covered in snow. The same went for his clothes.

Nekomaru….

You’ve done a lot for me, Hajime thought. You’ve done so much for all of us. You didn’t deserve
this.

Straightening up, Hajime brushed some of the fallen snow off his clothes and hair. They’d found a
few things so far, but he didn’t have any idea of what had happened, never mind who did it. He
made his way over to the door next. It was the only way in and out of the room. He pushed it
closed. The door had a sliding bolt lock. He tried to nudge it into place, but it didn’t move.
Wrapping his hand around it, he pushed harder. The lock responded, slowly sliding in to lock the
room. He frowned. It was a bit like the locks in their dorm rooms. Possible to lock, but only from
the inside. But when they’d come into the room, there hadn’t been anyone inside. And the lock
didn’t slide easily. So how did the killer create this locked room mystery?

**Truth Bullet #10 Obtained: Sliding Lock**

“It’s confusing, isn’t it?” Nagito murmured. The white-haired boy had crept up on him without his
noticing.

“What do you want, Komaeda?” His words were harsh, but his tone wasn’t. Not any more than
usual. He was trying to figure out what had happened, but he’d learned a lot about Nagito—enough
to know that writing him off was a terrible idea.

“Well, I wanted to know why you were locking us all in here, Hinata,” he answered brightly. “I
figured it must be because the door was locked when it was found. Would that be right?”

“Yeah,” Hajime said.

Nagito peered at the lock. “Confusing,” he repeated. He unlocked the door and opened it up.

“Whoa!” Hajime grabbed his arm. “What are you doing?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” Nagito blinked. “I’m going to investigate a few other areas.”

“You’re done here already?”

“Mhm.”
“But no one’s supposed to go investigate alone,” Hajime said. He didn’t know how much else he could find in here though. Snow, ice, a frozen lake…Nekomaru’s corpse. There were footprints all over from where everyone had come in. It wasn’t like the time at the beach house. There was no way to tell which footprints were here originally…if any even had been.

Something crunched under his foot as he was about to join Nagito. Pausing, he moved his shoe and crouched down, but it was just a bit of ice.

**Truth Bullet #11 Obtained: Bits of Ice**

“Coming?” Nagito asked.

“…Yeah.” Hajime followed him out of the room. He didn’t know what else to say to Mikan or Akane, and Fuyuhiko was busy talking with Peko. Nor did he want to spend more time with Endirya, who Hajime had a funny feeling had been watching him the whole time in the snow room.

“What are your thoughts so far?”

“Ah, I’m so happy that you’d ask,” Nagito said cheerfully as they walked down the painted hallway. “It’s a little like that first time on the island, huh, Hinata?”

The image of Nagito bursting into laughter as darkness blazed out of his eyes made Hajime clench his jaw. “I hope not,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You sound so scary.” Nagito’s gaze flickered to him. “Why don’t you take a deep breath?”

“Let’s just go.” Hajime stepped into the main hall. Twogami had told him to check the gym, but he’d already been in there, and Akane had been in there before him. So he doubted there was anything important in there. Instead he headed toward the storage room.

“Eh?” Nagito’s voice stopped him. “I thought Twogami wanted us to check the gym?”

“You heard that?” Hajime glanced back over his shoulder.

Nagito gave a small shrug.

“Well, I was in there earlier,” Hajime informed him. “And Akane was there even earlier than me.”

“You’re probably right.” Nagito chuckled. “I just thought it might be better to be sure.”

He couldn’t argue with that logic. So he crossed to the gym instead, opened the door, and stepped inside.

As he expected, the gym looked the same. The same equipment and layout, with no clear clues anywhere. But he could hardly turn around and leave right away, so he decided to poke around a little.

“It looks like Owari left her treadmill on,” Nagito said. He stood by the machine, reaching down to remove the cord and turn it off. “I think it’s admirable how she can push herself like that.”

“Wait!” Hajime shouted.

Nagito froze. “Hmm? What is it?”

Hajime walked over to the treadmill, looking at the screen. 48 minutes, 560 calories. He frowned. Maybe they could use this as another way to estimate the time of death. Or at least get some kind of approximation.
“Is everything alright?” Nagito asked. He was still in the same awkward position, eyes fixed unblinkingly on Hajime.

“Yeah. Yeah.” He stepped away from the machine. “Just thinking is all.”

Nagito walked away from the treadmill, moving around the perimeter of the room. “Hey, Hinata. Check this out.” He peered into a trash can—come to think of it, Hajime hadn’t seen a trashcan anywhere else besides the kitchen.

Hajime stopped by Nagito’s side. “What’d you find?”

“There.” Nagito pointed with his artificial hand.

Reluctantly, Hajime looked into the trash can. There were a few sanitized hand wipes, the kind you used to clean off the machines in the gym after using them. That was it. He opened his mouth to ask Nagito what this was all about when he spotted something.

“Hang on,” he muttered, reaching into the trash and grabbing the wipe. Pinkish red smears… bloodstains. He rooted through the other wipes too, but all of them were clean. Only this one had blood on it. That was odd. Why would this be here? Was it Nekomaru’s blood…or something else?

“Komaeda….” Hajime said slowly, looking from the wipe to him. “Did you know this was here?”

“Huh? You too, Hinata?” Nagito sighed. “I just saw it when I was passing by. That’s all. Although.” He rested his chin on the space between his thumb and pointer finger. “Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure this trash can was empty when we were in here last night.”

“You’re sure?”

Nagito laughed. “Trash like me would be pretty good with recognizing trash, huh, Hinata?”

“You aren’t trash, Komaeda.” Hajime barely mastered the impulse to roll his eyes. “This was a good find. Thanks.”

Kazuichi and Hiyoko were both looking over the shelves. Yet, somehow, their backs were firmly toward the other.

Hajime cleared his throat. “Find anything?”

“Found out Kazuichi’s a little coward.” Hiyoko snickered. “But that’s nothing new.”

“AAARGH!” He glared at her. “You just shut up!”
“Look, Hiyoko,” Hajime interjected. “I understand how you feel, but right now, we need—”

“Oh, please.” Now that she no longer looked like a small and foulmouthed brat, seeing her act like one felt…bizarre. Or maybe it was all the progress she’d made past that point suddenly being flushed away. Hajime made an effort not to glance back at Nagito. On that front, he sympathized.

“Anyway,” Kazuichi adjusted his beanie. “Everything seems to be here. I think. I didn’t really get to see it all earlier. Ibuki was being kinda, you know, overwhelming.”

“She does that.” Hajime glanced quickly over the shelves. Something caught his eye. The saw was back, sitting innocently up there. There weren’t any bloodstains on it. In fact, there weren’t any signs that it had been used at all. But it must have been. How else would it have gotten here?

**Truth Bullet #15 Obtained: Saw**

The other things still seemed to be there too. The rope, the hammers, the…. His gaze narrowed when it landed on the clothing rack. That had bothered him before too, but now—he advanced on it, rifling through the outfits just in case.

“Ew! You pervert!” Hiyoko shrieked from behind him.

“No, I’m just—” He shook his head. “Look, I don’t have time for this.” They’d had spare outfits for everyone here. As Hajime pushed the next one aside, he paused. This one felt…wet. It was a strikingly orange kimono much like Hiyoko’s. And it wasn’t just wet—it had large gashes in it, like it had been slit open. No way anybody could have worn this.

**Truth Bullet #16 Obtained: Slashed Kimono**

A clanging sound drew his attention. Kazuichi had just kicked over the bucket in the corner. “I could have used this,” he murmured wistfully. “Instead of…well….”

Hiyoko wrinkled her nose. “You guys are gross,” she declared.

“Hiyoko,” Hajime spoke quickly before she and Kazuichi could get into an argument. “You didn’t wear this, did you?”

“Ehh?” She gave him such a demonic expression that he immediately regretted asking the question. “Does that look like the kind of shit I’d wear? Please. I’m way classier than that.”

That was clearly a false statement, but Hajime simply sighed. “Okay.” Letting go of the outfit, he eyed both of them. “So neither of you found anything, right?”

“Man, don’t say it like that.” Kazuichi laughed nervously. “No, this room is clean.”

“Clean?” Nagito looked surprised. “You think so?”

Kazuichi rolled his eyes. “Argh! Yes! That’s why I said it.”

“That’s strange.” Nagito made a quiet, humming sound. “You saw it, didn’t you, Hinata?”

“Saw what?” He asked, eyeing Nagito.

“Right there.” Nagito pointed at another outfit hanging further down the rack. Hajime followed the invisible line made by his finger. Hanging there limply was one of Nekomaru’s outfits. Except the clothes looked even thicker and darker than usual. As Hajime walked toward them, he saw that
there was a small puddle formed under the clothes, mostly concealed by the metal rack. It looked like water. Touching the sleeve, Hajime found that it was heavy and wet—far more so than even clothes on Nekomaru himself had been. Why was that?

Truth Bullet #17 Obtained: Soaked Spare Outfit

Kazuichi appeared over Hajime’s shoulder. “What is that?” He asked, squinting.

“One of Nekomaru’s outfits is soaked,” he answered. “Yeah…the room was real clean, Kazuichi.”

“Ah.” Kazuichi looked momentarily bashful before rallying. “Well, I wouldn’t pay that much attention to a guy’s clothes!”

“Clearly,” Hiyoko snickered, looking at his jumpsuit.

“You too, Hiyoko.” Hajime pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “Are you both…?”

He took a deep breath. “Look, you know how this works. Any little detail could help here. Yeah, doing this sucks, alright? But we have to find out what happened, and not just for us. We owe it to Nekomaru.”

“Yeah.” Kazuichi groaned. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Humph.” Hiyoko scrunched her lips together. “We shouldn’t have to be doing any of this in the first place. This is nonsense. We’ve been through enough already.”

“I agree with you,” Hajime said, making an effort to keep his tone gentle, “but that’s not an option right now.”

Stepping back from the clothes rack, he spun around in a slow circle, trying to make sure there was nothing else in the room in need of investigation. Nothing jumped out at him. Finally his gaze landed on Nagito again. The pale boy stood quietly near the door, hands clasped behind his back. Last time Nagito had helped him find evidence like this…well, not last time. But the first time, it had been because he’d played a role in the whole—in Twogami’s death. And so far, Nagito had found a fair amount of the evidence himself while simply pointing it out to him.

But no. Hard as it was, he would force himself to trust Nagito on this one.

“I think we’re good in here now,” he said aloud. Both Hiyoko and Kazuichi looked relieved, probably because it meant they hadn’t overlooked more evidence. As much as he knew it was important to gather as much as he could, a small part of Hajime’s mind kept darting back to how all this connected. The time of death, the locked room, the missing limb—there were a lot of questions around this one. Even more alarming was the relative lack of suspects he had. Maybe someone else found something.

As he emerged from the storage room, a familiar sound jangled through his ears. Almost involuntarily, his eyes were drawn to the monitor on the wall. Fuzzy lines of white and black chased each other across the screen, eventually morphing into the sinister form of Monokuma.

"It would seem that it's time for the class trial!" Monokuma cackled, the sound bubbling forth from the monitors like static. "What's that? So soon? Yes, so soon! It's like they all say about being ready or not! Well - ready or not, because the class trial is! I'll see you soon!"

The screen shut off again.

It was—it was too early, wasn’t it? There was usually more time than this, wasn’t there? Sure, he
didn’t know exactly how much time had passed, but it felt shorter. Judging from the expressions
the others wore, they felt the same way. Not just Nagito, Hiyoko, and Kazuichi either. The other
doors opened, and the rest of his class was filing in from all around. In an uncharacteristic display
of affection, Fuyuhiko had his arm around Akane. He hurriedly removed it though as they entered
from the painted hallway. She wasn’t crying, exactly. But her face looked so empty that it was like
she’d been the one who died. She’d looked like this before too, back in the Funhouse.

Hajime clenched his fist. It seemed like a cruel joke. Why did Nekomaru have to die over and over
and over again?

“Um.” Sonia looked around. “Not that I wish to do so, but I must ask. Does anyone know where the
courtroom is? We have explored this place quite thoroughly.”

“That is a good point.” Peko brushed her bangs aside. “It may be through that locked door there.”
She pointed at the door near the dining hall.

Hajime was about to speak up and ask the others what they’d found when the door in question
swung open, and Endirya stepped through. His light, lavender eyes floated over everyone, and he
gently inclined his head toward his chest in a bow just too short to be called sarcastic. “If everyone
would be so kind,” he murmured.

“Tch. Not wasting time, are they?” Fuyuhiko scoffed.

“Um.” Mikan raised a timid hand. “N-not that I’m g-glad about it, but since this happened, could
we m-maybe use the restroom now?”

“After the trial,” Endirya said shortly. “Provided that there is an ‘after the trial.’”

A brief pause followed that statement.

“Well that’s fucking great.” Fuyuhiko rolled his eye and stormed toward the door. “Fine. Let’s do
this.”

“Young master!” Peko hurried after him.

“Wait!” Hajime called, though both of them had already disappeared into the next room. “We still
need to—”

“Let them go,” Twogami huffed, lumbering toward Endirya himself. “Anything we need to say can
come out in the trial.”

“I guess….” Hajime allowed reluctantly. All around him, the others were filing into the room.
Were none of them really bothered by this? He knew he didn’t have all the evidence yet. He didn’t
know how he knew, but he felt it, an ironclad cloud of worry and doubt nibbling on his gut.

“Hajime.” The voice was unusually soft-spoken for her, but it was unmistakably Mahiru’s. Sure
enough, she stood at his side, fiddling with the edges of her skirt. “Trust us, okay? We’re all going
to work together to get through this.”

How simple it was! Just because he didn’t have all the evidence didn’t mean the others hadn’t
found anything. It felt almost laughable that he hadn’t realized something like that.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You’re right.”

“Well, of course I am.” Mahiru smirked, the freckles across her face pulling back with that smile.
“I think Nekomaru would want us to be a team, you know? No more of that lone wolf nonsense.” She didn’t say it, but Hajime knew that last remark was a barb aimed at Fuyuhiko. Even so, she was right again.

“Let’s go then.” He said. Putting this off any longer would do little to alleviate his anxiety.

The only thing inside the locked room was a large elevator. Most of the others had already filed inside, and despite that, there was still a fair amount of space. There were no conversations though. Most people’s expressions were blank, almost robotic. As if they couldn’t believe this was happening again. No…as if they’d resigned themselves to the fact that this was happening again. How long did it take them to get used to it last time? How wrong was it to be used to this?

The doors slid shut, and the elevator rumbled to life. At least this one rocked and vibrated enough that Hajime knew it was definitely descending.

“Heh…it’s noisy,” Ryota said. It was hard to tell which was more awkward—his statement or the silence following it.

“Yeah.” Mikan agreed.

Hajime didn’t even have to look at Fuyuhiko to know he was rolling his eye. “No shit,” he snorted.

“Hey!” Mahiru snapped. “Easy now. Nekomaru…Nekomaru just died. We shouldn’t be doing this now.”

“I must agree.” Sonia added, pressing her hands together so tightly that her skin turned even whiter than usual. “I do not wish to believe it, but our lives are on the line once again.”

“I just won’t believe it. I won’t believe it.” Teruteru repeated over and over.

“Yeah, yeah, you keep saying that.” Hiyoko scoffed. “It’s happening anyway, you know.”

That was a harsh way of putting it, but Hajime agreed with the general sentiment. He didn’t say that though. Nobody did. Seconds slipped by as the elevator drove deeper and deeper. It must have been one of those slow-moving ones.

As if in response to that though, the rumbling stopped. With a faint ding, the doors sprang open. Hajime stepped out. He knew what was coming. The room might have been different, but everything else was the same. The weight of a friend’s death and the inability to accept that fact…that there was a killer among them. That they were all killers, and someone had relapsed. That they were trapped in yet another killing game about to begin yet another class trial. No, not about to begin. It had already started.

This life-or-death class trial billowing with hope and despair…had begun.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, all!

Sorry about this chapter being both late and a little short. I was sick for quite a while. Hopefully it's still coherent, haha.
And I hope you're all ready for a class trial! I'll try a few different writing techniques for that one to see how it looks. I may not end up liking them, but we'll see.

Thanks a ton, and see you all in March!
The Wayward Stone Sinks Slowly (5)

Chapter Notes

Well, new trial format gets a test run! Let's see how it goes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

List of Truth Bullets

Truth Bullet #1: Monokuma File
Truth Bullet #2: Snow Machines
Truth Bullet #3: Hole in Ice
Truth Bullet #4: Bloody Water
Truth Bullet #5: Peko’s Account
Truth Bullet #6: Autopsy Report
Truth Bullet #7: Blued Skin
Truth Bullet #8: Missing Hand
Truth Bullet #9: Missing Wristband
Truth Bullet #10: Sliding Lock
Truth Bullet #11: Bits of Ice
Truth Bullet #12: Treadmill Clock
Truth Bullet #13: Blood-Stained Wipe
Truth Bullet #14: Trash Can
Truth Bullet #15: Saw
Truth Bullet #16: Slashed Kimono
Truth Bullet #17: Soaked Spare Outfit

MONOKUMA: “Now then. Let’s begin with a simple explanation of the class trial. During the trial, you will present your arguments and vote for ‘whodunit.’ If you vote correctly, then I’ll only punish the blackened killer. But if you pick the wrong one, then I’ll execute everyone besides the blackened! And - aw, hell. You all know the rules by this point. Let’s do it! Let’s see some yummy despair!”
KAZUICHI: “Hold on a second. Why is he here?”

ENDIRYA: “Who? Me?”

KAZUICHI: “Yeah. You’re standing at your own podium and everything. Why are you part of this? You already know what happened.”

ENDIRYA: “I don’t.”

KAZUICHI: “Eh?”

HIYOKO: “Just ignore him. He’s lying. Probably just wants to confuse us. Don’t want you idiots to fall for it.”

AKANE: “Who cares about any of that?”

HAJIME: Huh? Akane?

AKANE: “I don’t care who participates. I just want to know who did it. Who would do something like this? Who would kill him again?”

PEKO: “That’s what we’re here to find out. We shouldn’t get emotional and lose focus.”

SONIA: “That makes sense. It is not like whoever did this will simply reveal themselves now.”

GUNDHAM: “Kehehe. They hide in the shadows.”

TERUTERU: “L-like a voyeur?”

RYOTA: “Um…I haven’t done anything like this before. Where should we begin?”

TWOGAMI: “Ryota is right. Enough fooling around.”

MAHIRU: “That doesn’t really answer where we should start though.”

IBUKI: “It’s, you know, like an opening act!”

HAJIME: “I think we should start with how Nekomaru was killed.”

FUYUHIKO: “Yeah. That did seem strange to me.”

TWOGAMI: “Very well. We can start there.”

GUNDHAM: “Strange, you say?”

HIYOKO: “Not that I want to agree with anything the weirdo says, but yeah. What about it seemed strange? He was drowned.”

NAGITO: “That does seem likely.”

PEKO: “No, I agree. Something about it was definitely strange.”

AKANE: “Strange? What do you mean?”

----------------NONSTOP DEBATE START------------------------

PEKO: “Something was definitely strange about the body.”
HIYOKO: “Yeah, you said that already.”

SONIA: “Maybe it was his wet clothes?”

MAHIRU: “I think that would make sense if he was in the water though.”

RYOTA: “Were they even that wet?”

IBUKI: “I got it! He wasn’t even in the water at all!”

FUYUHIKO: “That’s stupid.”

MIKAN: “Um…um…er….”

GUNDHAM: “Perhaps she means the blood stains quenching this thirst for violence.”

TERUTERU: “Yeah! A bloody body’s no good!”

MIKAN: “I think she meant the— the severed hand.”

TERUTERU: “Yeah, that’d be important too. Saturday nights would be so much worse.”

KAZUICHI: “Eh?”

Select: **Truth Bullet 8: Missing Hand** with statement: severed hand

HAJIME: “I agree with you, Mikan.”

--------------------CONSENT! NONSTOP DEBATE END--------------------

MIKAN: “Eeeek! You do?”

HAJIME: “Yes. The missing hand is definitely strange. I can only think of one reason for it.”

1. To obscure the cause of death
2. To hide evidence
3. To use it for fingerprints
4. To collect hands

Select: **B) To hide evidence**

HAJIME: “I think they wanted to hide evidence.”

AKANE: “Hide evidence? How?”

KAZUICHI: Akane makes a good point for once. We’d all obviously notice that his hand was missing. That’s not exactly something you can hide.”

IBUKI: “It sure wouldn’t be very handy.”

TWOGAMI: “Shut up, all of you. Hajime wasn’t referring to the hand itself.”

NAGITO: “I would have to agree. It’s not the hand itself but rather, what was on it.”

HAJIME: What was on it…?

CHOOSE A TRUTH BULLET
Select: Truth Bullet #9: Missing Wristband.

HAJIME: “The wristband containing Nekomaru’s forbidden and compulsory actions. Could they have taken off his hand to get that?”

TWOGAMI: “I thought that’s where you were going with that. It’s a fine observation.”

MAHIRU: “Why would they even want to take his wristband though?”

HIYOKO: “Heh, it was probably that wooly freak over there.”

ENDIRYA: “…wooly?”

HIYOKO: “Cause your hair’s so long. Not as trashy as Mikan’s though.”

MIKAN: “Eh? Why m-me?”

FUYUHIKO: “Hey, that’s a good point. Not about the hair thing. But the wristband – did you take it because Nekomaru died?”

ENDIRYA: “No.”

AKANE: “Humph. Guess he didn’t then.”

KAZUICHI: “Hold on. Don’t believe him so easily! He’s part of this trial too, right? So what if he did it, and he’s just lying about the whole thing?”

SONIA: “Oh.”

ENDIRYA: “Huh. Well, you can think that. I admit that it’s a possibility.”

KAZUICHI: “See? I told you!”

GUNDHAM: “Fuhahaha! Kazuichi, your reasoning is as flimsy as always. So typical for you mortal beings. The contract stipulations bind all of you, but him most of all.”

KAZUICHI: “What?”

SONIA: “I believe Gundham is saying that the rules would prevent such a thing.”

RYOTA: “Oh! Yeah! That’s true, isn’t it? If I recall correctly, didn’t one of the rules say that the observer couldn’t attack any of us?”

PEKO: “I believe an exception was made for self-defense.”

HAJIME: “That’s right. If we look at the exact text of the rule. It said: ‘An Observer will join the Remnants of Despair to watch the game. Attacking the Observer, except in self-defense, is subject to disciplinary action.’”

FUYUHIKO: “So maybe Nekomaru attacked him first, and Endirya killed him in self-defense?”

NAGITO: “…”

AKANE: “No way.”

TERUTERU: “No way? What’s no way?”
HIYOKO: “Right. What does a rock-for-brains like you have to add?”

MAHIRU: “Hiyoko, I know you’re upset right now, but—”

AKANE: “There’s no way that guy coulda beat Coach Nekomaru. Look at him. He’s a twig. He looks almost as frail as Nagito over there.”

GUNDHAM: “Indeed. Even among mortal standards, his magic essence appears most pathetic.”

ENDIRYA: “….”

MONOKUMA: “Hey! You’re getting off topic. Let’s talk about this beautiful murder!”

HAJIME: “But this is related. It’ll help us understand if Endirya is even physically capable of committing this crime.”

SONIA: “Even if he is not, could he have arranged some kind of trap?”

NAGITO: “I wonder if there was any evidence of a trap like that.”

KAZUICHI: “A trap would be possible, right? I mean, it’s not like Nekomaru had a Good Night button anymore. And without that, I’m not sure anyone could take him in a fight. Except, you know, maybe Hajime.”

HAJIME: “Eh?”

KAZUICHI: “Not you. I meant, ah, the other you. You know?”

MAHIRU: “Are you saying it was Izuru?”

KAZUICHI: “What? No! I mean, it’s possible – but Endirya’s definitely more likely.”

ENDIRYA: “If that’s what you think, then why don’t we discuss what sort of trap I could have used?”

TWOGAMI: “Hold on a minute. I think we’ve gotten off-track. There’s no point right now in throwing mindless accusations around.”

KAZUICHI: “Mindless?”

TWOGAMI: “We were originally looking at the cause of death and how the wristband going missing might have been to hide evidence. Isn’t that right, Hajime?”

HAJIME: “Uh—yeah.”

PEKO: “Were you trying to imply that Nekomaru didn’t drown?”

HAJIME: “I wouldn’t go that far yet. But I thought it was worth discussing.”

GUNDHAM: “What are you implying?”

NAGITO: “I might be mistaken, but I think Hinata is suggesting that Nidai might have killed himself.”

MIKAN: “K-killed himself?”

FUYUHIKO: “Are you saying it was a suicide?”
HAJIME: “I’m not saying for sure. But with the wristbands—”

HIYOKO: “No, that’s wrong!”

------------------------REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN START------------------------

HIYOKO: “You can be a real idiot sometimes, Hajime.

HAJIME: “Eh? What do you mean?”

HIYOKO: “Seriously, you still don’t know? Jeez. I guess I’ll have to explain it to you then. There’s no way Nekomaru killed himself. He was our coach, you know? Sure, he was big and loud and kind of annoying sometimes, but there’s no way someone like him would just give up. He’s not a coward!”

------------------------ADVANCE------------------------

HAJIME: “I’m not trying to say he was a coward. It may not have been an intentional suicide. His forbidden action could have gone off.”

HIYOKO: “All of us had three strikes on our forbidden and compulsory actions, right? Even Akane wouldn’t be dumb enough to do the same thing three times. Not to mention that none of us knew our forbidden actions. There’s no way he could have set it off!”

HAJIME: That was true…it would have been difficult. But not impossible. He hadn’t found anything during the investigation to prove it, but by remembering what that person had said earlier….

Gained: **Truth Bullet 18: Endirya’s Testimony**

Select: **Truth Bullet 18: Endirya’s Testimony** with statement: none of us knew.

HAJIME: “Allow me to cut through your words!”

------------------------BREAK! REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN END------------------------

HAJIME: “Hiyoko, that’s wrong.”

HIYOKO: “Wrong? What? Heehee, no I’m not.”

NAGITO: “You’re talking about what Endirya told us, right?”

PEKO: “Us?”

NAGITO: “Myself, Hinata, Mitarai, Sonia, Twogami, Tanaka, and the late Nidai. We all met Endirya in the storage room when we were exploring our environment.”

HIYOKO: “Eh? And? So what?”

HAJIME: “So Endirya told us that the first three people who asked would be told their forbidden actions. In other words, it’s possible that Nekomaru learned his forbidden action ahead of time. If the people who know their forbidden actions already come forward now, and there’s only two of them, then that will support that possibility.”

HIYOKO: “But there are so many flaws in that. Maybe the killer was one of the three. Maybe someone learned that their action prevented them from coming forwar—”
MAHIRU: “Wait! There’s a rule against sharing forbidden actions, remember?”

HIYOKO: “Ah! Yes! Yaaay! You’re so smart, Mahiru!”

HAJIME: “I know. I’m not saying anyone has to share their forbidden actions. I just thought the people who learned theirs could say as much. They don’t have to tell us what they are.”

NAGITO: “Would that violate any rules, Monokuma?”

MONOKUMA: “Meh. I guess not. Man, you guys are boring though. You’re all taking this so seriously.”

KAZUICHI: “Why is that surprising? Our lives are on the line you know.”

IBUKI: “Yeah. It’s kind of a bummer, really. Even I wouldn’t write a song about this.”

MONOKUMA: “Yeah, but you all should be having more fun with this! It’s a game. A beautiful game of murder. You should be enjoying this class trial from the bottom of your hearts!”

IBUKI: “Nah.”

HIYOKO: “Nuh-uh.”

GUNDHAM: “Such blood-sport entertainment is nothing but a mere illusion.”

MONOKUMA: “Yeah, yeah. I thought we’d be able to bypass all the posturing by now. But go ahead, get it all out of your systems. This faux justice bores me anyway.”

ENDIRYA: “Ah. I believe you were discussing who asked for their forbidden actions.”

TWOGAMI: “I was…about to say that.”

RYOTA: “I learned mine.”

TERUTERU: “You did? What is it?”

FUYUHIKO: “Did you forget already, dumbass? He can’t tell us.”

SONIA: “But who was the second person? Can we even be sure that three people asked?”

ENDIRYA: “Oh, yes.”

MONOKUMA: “Curiosity kills the fish!”

MIKAN: “Um, um, not that I want to correct you, but…I don’t think that’s the saying.”

GUNDHAM: “Kekekeke. Very well. It is of no concern. Such restrictions may be formidable to you, but to one as powerful as I, Gundham Tanaka, they are but dust. Nonetheless, I fulfilled my objective in gaining knowledge.”

HAJIME: “Are you…saying you also learned your forbidden action?”

SONIA: “He is.”

HIYOKO: “It’s a good thing we have you here to translate for him. I swear, he just keeps getting crazier and crazier. Maybe you should be a translator instead of a princess.”
SONIA: “Well, I am fluent in a number of languages.”
NAGITO: “So did anybody else learn their forbidden action?”
RYOTA: “…No one’s saying anything.”
HAJIME: “That makes it more likely that it was Nekomaru.”
AKANE: “So Coach Nekomaru knew his action and then…hmm. What then?”
PEKO: “Indeed. What then? Even if he learned his action, we were all given a three-strike system. Because of that, it would be virtually impossible to die by your forbidden action accidentally.”
MAHIRU: “Oh. That’s true. But if we follow this line of reasoning, it means—”
MIKAN: “N-Nidai-san committed suicide?”
KAZUICHI: “Suicide?”
AKANE: “Are you saying he killed himself? That’s impossible!”
NAGITO: “Well, I suppose it’s not literally impossible.”
SONIA: “No. There is no way one of our friends would commit suicide. Especially not Nekomaru. He did not do it before, remember? He would not do it this time either.”
TWOGAMI: “I believe we said this a moment ago. At the very least, it’s a possibility. We should discuss it.”

----------------NONSTOP DEBATE START------------------------

KAZUICHI: “Did Nekomaru really commit suicide?”
GUNDHAM: “Such a thing would be blasphemous!”
PEKO: “But leaving that aside, would it even be possible?”
NAGITO: “Well, the poison in the wristbands was the same kind used in the Future Foundation’s killing game. Isn’t that right?”
ENDIRYA: “…."
RYOTA: “Well, I guess the body kind of looked the same. But it was hard to say.”
MIKAN: “I-I didn’t have any way to test for poison, so…."
FUYUHIKO: “Then maybe the cause of death really was drowning?”
TWOGAMI: “If that were the case, why bother removing his hand and wristband?”
TERUTERU: “Maybe that’s their standard procedure here?”
HIYOKO: “Aaargh! This is so frustrating! Just come forward already!”

Select: Truth Bullet 8: Missing Hand with statement standard procedure here.

HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”
TERUTERU: “Heeeeeeeeeeeeee?”

NAGITO: “What have you figured out, Hinata?”

HAJIME: “The hand.”

TWOGAMI: “The—hand?”

HAJIME: “Neokmaru’s missing hand wasn’t just about hiding evidence. It’s actually proof that Monokuma and the others weren’t involved.”

GUNDHAM: “Proof, you say?”

ENDIRYA: “This should be interesting.”

HAJIME: “Well, proof might be a strong word. But they wouldn’t need to take the whole hand, right? They could just remove the wristband itself. It would be far less hassle and a lot more efficient that way.”

MAHIRU: “That does make sense. They were the ones who came up with these, after all.”

RYOTA: “I guess so. The ones in my killing game snapped off once their signal was cut.”

IBUKI: “Mhm, mhm, I see. That makes sense to Ibuki!”

FUYUHIKO: “But what if that’s what they want us to think?”

HIYOKO: “Yeah! I agree with the chibi yakuza over there!”

FUYUHIKO: “Ch-chibi?”

TWOGAMI: “I’ve been listening to this go on for a while now, trying to figure out what you were saying. I agree that it’s unlikely Monokuma or Endirya or anyone like that was behind this. Fuyuhiko.”

FUYUHIKO: “What?”

TWOGAMI: “While I understand your concerns, we now have two bits of evidence leading away from your theory. Endirya’s own physical capability and the missing hand. For the time being, I think we would get further by following the evidence rather than digging into unsupported hypotheses.”


PEKO: “That is a wise decision. We will get further by cooperating with each other.”

MONOKUMA: “Don’t you think you’re all getting bogged down?”

HAJIME: “Huh?”

ENDIRYA: “What Monokuma means is that you’ve gone back and forth trying to determine the cause of death. Maybe it was drowning. Maybe it was poison. Given the available evidence, none of you have any way to know, unless you were there.”
GUNDHAM: “What are you suggesting?”

ENDIRYA: “When you’re stuck on a problem like this, it often makes sense to approach from a different angle. That’s what I would recommend, anyway.”

AKANE: “Huh? What are you trying to say? Heh, if you’re trying to distract us from figuring out what happened to Nekomaru, I’ll snap you like a twig.”

IBUKI: “He’s totally right though. I hasn’t been able to follow this at all. There are too many possibilities.”

TWOGAMI: “Very well. There are a number of other mysteries.”

RYOTA: “Like the time of death? That’s important as well, right?”

MIKAN: “Eeeeeeek! I’m s-sorry!”

RYOTA: “Wah! Why? What did I say?”

MIKAN: “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

HIYOKO: “Oh, I get it. Last time we couldn’t determine the time of death, it’s because you planned it that way. You did that again, didn’t you, you trashy pigshit?”

MIKAN: “I’m sorry for being pigshit!”

KAZUICHI: “That’s—that’s not the—you’re supposed to deny the rest….”

HAJIME: “It’s too soon to start accusing people.”

SONIA: “Yes! We do not even have alibis yet.”

TERUTERU: “Do alibis even matter? We were all asleep in our rooms, yeah?”

NAGITO: “That would depend on when the murder actually happened. Why don’t we try and pin that down first?”

-------------------------------NONSTOP DEBATE START-------------------------------

IBUKI: “When Nekomaru was killed? Mmm… it was definitely sometime last night!”

TERUTERU: “He was eating a lot of chicken at dinner.”

HAJIME: “I saw him last night. Gundham and I were in the lounge with him.”

GUNDHAM: “Hmm. Your ability to recall such events is truly commendable. Indeed, he left the lounge and returned to his domain shortly after.”

TWOGAMI: “There are no clocks or anything down here. Not even on our Monopads. So we have no way of knowing when exactly that was.”

KAZUICHI: “Or if it even happened.”

GUNDHAM: “Kehehe.”

SONIA: “Kazuichi! You must not doubt Gundham!”
KAZUCHI: “Waaagh!”

HIYOKO: “Maybe the big guy went out to take a shit? There were no toilets, and he was obsessed and gross.”

AKANE: “What did you say?”

RYOTA: “If nobody saw Nidai, then there’s nothing we can do. The time frame is just too wide. It’s hopeless!”

Select **Truth Bullet #5: Peko’s Account** with statement **nobody saw Nidai**.

HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”

---------------------------NONSTOP DEBATE END---------------------------

HAJIME: “Someone did see Nekomaru after that time. Isn’t that right, Peko?”

PEKO: “Indeed. I went to fetch him for his shift. He had been in his room at the time.”

MAHIRU: “Oh! That’s right. You talked about that. We had a few different people on guard duty. What was the order again?”

NAGITO: “If I recall, it was Pekoyama, Kuzuryu, Nidai, Tanaka, and Hinata. Am I wrong?”

HAJIME: “No, that’s right.”

AKANE: “So what you’re saying is that it’s one of those people. Awright! Just tell me who!”

HAJIME: “Wait, I didn’t say that—”

TERUTERU: “I didn’t know we had so many voyeurs in the group. My oh my.”

MAHIRU: “Shut up.”

KAZUCHI: “But it’s likely. I mean, no one else knew the order of all the sentries, right?”

FUYUHIKO: “Obviously. Anyone else knowing would be a security risk.”

HIYOKO: “Cause that clearly worked out.”

HAJIME: Come to think of it…there was someone else who knew. I don’t really want to say it, but it’s a possibility I can’t ignore either. Somebody else who knew the exact order of the guards….

---------------------------SELECT SOMEONE---------------------------

HAJIME

TWOGAMI

RYOTA

MAHIRU

HIYOKO

MIKAN
HAJIME: “It has to be you!”

------------------------SELECT SOMEONE END------------------------

HAJIME: “Komaeda….”

NAGITO: “Huh?”

IBUKI: “Nagito? Could it be?”

HAJIME: “I told you the order of the sentries last night.”

NAGITO: “….”

FUYUHIKO: “I fuckin’ knew it.”

SONIA: “Hold on! We should not jump to conclusions.”

MIKAN: “U-um, but, why—kyaaah! I started talking on my own! I’m sorry!”

MAHIRU: “It’s fine, just say it.”

MIKAN: “I was just wondering why, erm, why based on that order, why Pekoyama was the one to get Nidai. Shouldn’t it have been Kuzuryu?”

KAZUICHI: “Oh! That’s a good point.

TERUTERU: “Maybe Komaeda put her up to it!”

PEKO: “No! No, I just…I wanted to let him sleep. So I took his shift.”

GUNDHAM: “What? Did his mana truly take so long to recharge?”

FUYUHIKO: “She was trying to do something nice. Don’t you bastards go blaming her for this. Komaeda’s far more suspicious.”
ENDIRYA: “If I may interject.”

HIYOKO: “You may not. Butt out.”

MONOKUMA: “Upupupu! So bossy. That’s my job, ya know.”

RYOTA: “Your—job?”

MONOKUMA: “Of course! Do you know how depressing it would to host a killing game with only yourself? People would think I was some unpopular loser! No, no, you need people to order about.”

AKANE: “Who…cares about that?”

HAJIME: Huh?

AKANE: “Nobody cares about this nonsense. I know I don’t…don’t always get a lot of things, and my head is stuffed full of dreams. But I’m alive now. I can enjoy that. And Coach Nekomaru can’t. This crap keeps happening to him over and over. So if you’re going to stand there and, and, and talk about such stupid nonsense, then…I’ll kill you myself!”

HAJIME: …

NAGITO: “…”

MONOKUMA: “…”

ENDIRYA: “It sounds to me like Peko had ample time to kill Nekomaru.”

GUNDHAM: “Hmm?”

FUYUHIKO: “The fuck did you just say?”

PEKO: “…”

ENDIRYA: “She took two shifts, and no one saw her or Nekomaru during that time, correct?”

PEKO: “I—”

FUYUHIKO: “I saw her.”

ENDIRYA: “Oh?”

FUYUHIKO: “Yeah. She came to check on me before getting Nekomaru. I watched her go to his door and saw him come out. Peko stayed with me after that. There’s no way she did it.”

HAJIME: …Huh.

FUYUHIKO: “Got it, bastard? Don’t you ever try questioning her again.”

ENDIRYA: “Hmm.”

IBUKI: “So Fuyuhiko and Peko have alibis. I see, I see. That means they couldn’t have done it.”

MAHIRU: “I suppose.”

SONIA: “Very well then! Let us go around to determine other possible alibis! Let Operation
Destroy the Weakest Alibi 2.0 Commence!

------------------------NONSTOP DEBATE START------------------------

TWOGAMI: “We keep talking about alibis. Do you really believe that’s going to help us here?”

MAHIRU: “Most of us were probably asleep at the time. I know I was.”

IBUKI: “Me too! Off in slumberland! Hey, did you know that playing music before bed helps you have good dreams?”

KAZUICHI: “I…don’t think that’s true.”

SONIA: “I regret to say that I was also asleep.”

TERUTERU: “Yeah. Same here. I turned in early so I could get up earlier to make breakfast for everyone.”

MIKAN: “W-was there anyone awake?”

HIYOKO: “I wasn’t. But no how much you sleep, Mikan, you’ll never be as pretty as me.”

MIKAN: “EEEP!”

TWOGAMI: “You’re not listening. It doesn’t matter who was awake or not.”

TERUTERU: “Huh? Why not?”

GUNDHAM: “He speaks wisely. Hehehe. Indeed, the need to sleep is but a temporary illusion.”

TWOGAMI: “Shut up. What I’m saying is that trying to determine alibis is pointless. We don’t have any idea when the murder occurred. It could have been anyone.”

Select Truth Bullet #12: Treadmill Clock with statement any idea when the murder occurred.

HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”

------------------------NONSTOP DEBATE END------------------------

HAJIME: “We may not know the exact time the murder occurred. But it should be possible for us to get a decent estimate.”

GUNDHAM: “How?”

HAJIME: “It’s thanks to Akane, really.”

AKANE: “Huh?”

HAJIME: “You went to the gym last night—this morning, correct?”

AKANE: “Yeah. You saw me in there. Is this important at all? What are you trying to say?”

NAGITO: “Now, now. Why don’t you take a deep breath? I may not have much right to say this, but I think this might have some importance.”

HAJIME: “When you went to the gym, did you see anyone guarding the storage room?”
AKANE: “Huh. Now that you mention it…I don’t think I saw anyone there.”

MAHIRU: “So that would mean…Peko, you didn’t see Akane either, huh?”

PEKO: “I did not. No one came out into the hall when I was there.”

TWOGAMI: “In other words, Akane didn’t go out until after Peko. And since Nekomaru wasn’t there, whatever happened to him might have happened already.”

FUYUHIKO: “I guess that sounds reasonable.”

HIYOKO: “But does anyone have any idea when that would even be?”

TERUTERU: “Yeah! There aren’t clocks here or nothing. Not even the kitchen has one. It’s a disgrace. A lesser chef wouldn’t know how long to cook something. All the food would get burned!”

HAJIME: “That’s where the treadmill clock comes in.”

GUNDHAM: “The clock, you say?”

KAZUICHI: “Didn’t something like this happen in the Fun House too? When Gundham messed with the clocks?”

SONIA: “Kazuichi! You must cease!”

NAGITO: “I don’t think it’s the same thing. There weren’t even clocks here to begin with.”

HAJIME: “The timer on the treadmill said that it had been about forty-eight minutes. That would be when I stopped Akane shortly before finding…Nekomaru.”

NAGITO: “We did get one clear indication of time for finding the body. You remember what that was, right?”

CHOOSE A TRUTH BULLET

Select: Truth Bullet #1: Monokuma File

HAJIME: “You’re referring to the Monokuma File, right?”

IBUKI: “Oh yeah! That thing always has the time of death!”

KAZUICHI: “Well, not always. And why did you sound so cheerful saying that?”

PEKO: “But according to the Monokuma File, the body was discovered around 4am. It doesn’t say anything about the exact time of death.”

RYOTA: “That could still be a useful point of reference though.”

TERUTERU: “And what about Mikan? Couldn’t she tell us the time of death?”

MAHIRU: “Were you even listening earlier?”

MIKAN: “Eeeek! I’m not a c-coroner, and the body was left out in the water and snow, s-so….”

FUYUHIKO: “Sounds like that’s a dead end.”
SONIA: “Do not be ashamed, Mikan. You did your best.”

HIYOKO: “If she did her best and still failed, then that’s even more reason to be ashamed.”

MIKAN: “I’m sorry.”

HAJIME: “So if it was around four, and the treadmill had been in use for 48 minutes, then that would put the possible time of death at closer to 3 am. Or earlier.”

GUNDHAM: “How much earlier? When did Peko cease her constant vigilance?”

PEKO: “I’m not sure exactly. I believe it was shortly after midnight. But that’s only a guess.”

TWOGAMI: “A guess. That’s the best you can come up with?”

MONOKUMA: “Man, you’re all getting really caught up on this, aren’t ya?”

MAHIRU: “It’s your fault for not giving us a way to tell time. Don’t try and pass the blame.”

ENDIRYA: “Would you like to know the time?”

AKANE: “You’d tell us the time of death? Hey. How would you know that anyway? Were you there?”

ENDIRYA: “No and no.”

KAZUICHI: “I still don’t see why we should just believe that.”

FUYUHIKO: “We went over this already. The hand thing. You’re the ones who shut that down. Don’t tell me you forgot about that already.”

IBUKI: “Is he skulking?”

HIYOKO: “He’s definitely skulking!”

FUYUHIKO: “I am not. Both of you just shut up!”

PEKO: “Do not skulk, young master.”

FUYUHIKO: “…”

TWOGAMI: “Endirya, what were you offering to tell us then?”

GUNDHAM: “Before you answer, be warned. Should you lie, you will suffer the wrath of my Four Dark Devas of Destruction.”

TWOGAMI: “Shut up.”

ENDIRYA: “I was in the storage room. Naturally, I paid attention to what was happening outside. Thus I can tell you that it was nearly 12:30 when Peko left for her room.”

MONOKUMA: “Hey!”

ENDIRYA: “I’m sure it was boring you to see them get stuck on this of all things. Relax.”

MIKAN: “Um…um…so can we trust what he’s saying?”
HIYOKO: “Monokuma objecting to it made it seem totally legit.”

KAZUICHI: “The hell it did. That’s what he wanted you to think.”

RYOTA: “I guess it did seem a little suspicious.”

MAHIRU: “But it’s not like he has a reason to lie to us, right?”

IBUKI: “Unless he did the killing! Splat! Shank! Brrrr! Glub-glub-glub!”

TERUTERU: “What do we do? Is there…is there any way to know for sure?”

ENDIRYA: “There’s only what you choose to believe.”

HAJIME: What you choose to believe…huh. Hadn’t Chiaki said something similar? Not exactly the same, but something similar. Doubt here was a valid option, but it wouldn’t help them. They’d get stuck in this same circle without any clear evidence. If they kept doing that, they’d never get to the bottom of this.

Was that…was that what the killer wanted all along? Who could it be?

Who killed Nekomaru?

CLASS TRIAL SUSPEND!

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long aaaaaah life why -

But thank you for being patient with me, and thank you even more for reading. Still experimenting with a few different things here - some worked, some didn't...we'll see. Hope you all enjoyed! Stay awesome!
Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about the delays with this one.

Work has been absolutely crazy lately. I've had maybe - maybe - two or three a hours a week to work on this. That'll probably continue for a while. I really wanted to finish the trial in this chapter, but I felt like it would be unfair to make you all wait even longer than I have. So I'm posting all I have for it now. Again, I'm so sorry this took so long.

Anyway...hope you enjoy!

MONOKUMA: Partway into the trial, and they still have no idea what happened. Just listening to them try to work it all out – it’s kinda sad, dontcha think? I wonder if they’re even taking it seriously. Or maybe they’re doing what I suggested and just enjoying it. Heheh. That wouldn’t be too surprising, would it? They’re not exactly rookies when it comes to this stuff. Nope! They’re ultimates.

CLASS TRIAL RESUME!

AKANE: “…."

KAZUICHI: “…."

NAGITO: “Wow. It suddenly got really quiet in here, huh?”

FUYUHIKO: “What did you expect?”

NAGITO: “But I’m sure everything will be alright. It’s not like you all are going to falter now. You’ve been through so much worse than this before.”

SONIA: “That…is true. However—”

AKANE: “Worse?”

HAJIME: Huh?

AKANE: “What…worse? Don’t talk to me about worse. Coach Nekomaru is dead. He died cold and alone in that damned snow room. It’s like nothing changes. Damn it.”

HAJIME: …Huh? Hold on a second….

TWOGAMI: “Ah, that reminds me. When Hajime and Akane and I tried to enter the room, we couldn’t. It was locked from the inside.”

MAHIRU: “Eh? From the inside?”

TERUTERU: “But that’s impossible! How would the killer get out then?”
TWOGAMI: “Regardless of whether or not we take Endirya at his word, that mystery remains an indisputable fact.”

NAGITO: “In other words, instead of arguing about something we can’t prove, we should work together to solve what we can?”

GUNDHAM: “Indeed, a wise decision. Only then can you push past your mortal limits.”

PEKO: “Let’s discuss it then.”

-------------------NONSTOP DEBATE START-------------------

Available Truth Bullets:

Truth Bullet: Snow Machines
Truth Bullet: Hole in Ice
Truth Bullet: Sliding Lock
Truth Bullet: Bits of Ice
Truth Bullet: Saw
Truth Bullet: Slashed Kimono
Truth Bullet: Soaked Spare Outfit
Truth Bullet: Missing Hand

TWOGAMI: “How could the killer have locked the door from the inside?”

KAZUICHI: “Maybe they didn’t? Maybe it really was a suicide!”

MIKAN: “M-maybe they glued the door shut?”

FUYUHIKO: “Tch. That sounds pretty fucking familiar.”

RYOTA: “Maybe the room had a secret entrance?”

GUNDHAM: “Could it be? A spell of invisibility? Has Monokuma employed a sorcerer?”

HIYOKO: “Oh my God, can someone shut him up?”

TERUTERU: “Perhaps the killer was hiding inside the room?”

SONIA: “I believe that is common in many locked-room murders.”


TWOGAMI: “Butt out.”

NAGITO: “Is there anything else they could have done to lock the door to the snow room?”
IBUKI: “Ah, I got it! They tied a big doll to the ceiling and wound it up! Then they left so that when it unwound, the **counter-spin pushed the lock closed**!”

MAHIRU: “....”

HIYOKO: “…You can’t be serious.”

HAJIME: They’d already discussed the possibility of suicide. The missing hand ruled that out. At the very least, it made it unlikely. And they hadn’t found any evidence for the door being glued shut or the room having a secret entrance. Other than the absence of glue or another way in, though, they didn’t really have a way to disprove those either. Gundham was continuing to be his usual, inscrutable self. Could someone have been hiding in the room? Where would they be? There were three of them who’d come in, after all. Surely someone would have said something.

So…that meant…..

Select: Truth Bullet **Sliding Lock** with statement: **Counter-spin pushed the lock closed**.

HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”

----------------NONSTOP DEBATE END----------------------

HAJIME: “I saw the lock for myself, and it didn’t move easily.”

IBUKI: “Sooooo?”

NAGITO: “Hinata’s right. I think it would take a lot of force to push the lock in. More than a spinning doll could make, anyway.”

IBUKI: “Ah, I see, I see. I was just throwing stuff out there anyway.”

FUYHIKO: “Great. So you proved the obviously crazy idea didn’t happen. There wasn’t even a doll in there. Or rope.”

TERUTERU: “Were you…looking for rope?”

HIYOKO: “His nose is bleeding! Gross!”

HAJIME: “Hold on a second.”

AKANE: “Huh? Did ya realize something? If you’re holding back on me, I’m gonna tackle you!”

HAJIME: “It’s not like that, Akane. But…I just thought that we were able to break into the room.”

AKANE: “Eh? What’s wrong with that?”

HIYOKO: “Yeah. It happened, didn’t it? Why would that be odd?”

HAJIME: “Well…”

What was strange about being able to break into the room?

1. The lock was still intact
2. The door had been open
3. It took 3 people
4. Nothing
HAJIME: The door had definitely been shut when they’d gotten there. And there happened to be three of them…that in and of itself wasn’t strange. Maybe it could have been done with fewer, but that didn’t feel relevant.

So it had to be…

Select A) The lock was still intact

HAJIME: If we’d broken the lock when we entered, it should have splintered off from the door.”

IBUKI: “Oh, I get it. It’s like when you bang something really, really hard!”

TERUTERU: “Heeeeh?”

KAZUICHI: “Could you repeat that?”

TWOGAMI: “That’s a valid point. If the door were locked at the time, and it was a sliding lock, then the bolt should have broken off if we forced the door open.”

RYOTA: “But it didn’t do that, right? So what could this mean?”

SONIA: “Perhaps the door was never locked in the first place?”

HAJIME: …!

HIYOKO: “What is that? Like, I can only laugh. Obviously the door was locked, you blonde-haired bimbo.”

HAJIME: “No, hang on. Sonia might have a point.”

MIKAN: “Heh? Really?”

HIYOKO: “Well obviously she does.”

KAZUICHI: “Wow, that turnaround was so quick.”

MIKAN: “If the door wasn’t locked…maybe they did use glue after all?”

FUYUHIKO: “I doubt it. We didn’t find any on the frame or around the door.”

NAGITO: “Where would they have even gotten glue? I don’t recall seeing any among the items Endirya offered in the storage room.”

ENDIRYA: “Indeed. I did not provide any glue.”

KAZUICHI: “What about a hammer? Or nails? They could have boarded it up or something. I saw those in the storage room.”

TERUTERU: “They would have needed a hammer to break the ice, right? That could be it.”

PEKO: “And what then? Did the boards magically disappear?”

TWOGAMI: “Obviously that is impossible.”

NAGITO: “There wasn’t enough for something as big as a board to get buried in the snow either. I think we can safely rule that out. Not that I wanted to doubt you, Soda. It was definitely an idea.”
HAJIME: …! What…what was that feeling? All of a sudden, something simply—clicked.

NAGITO: “Huh? Hinata?”

HAJIME: “Eh?”

MAHIRU: “You had this look on your face. Are you okay?”

RYOTA: “Did you figure something out? She…Kirigiri had a similar look back in our game, so….”

HAJIME: “It’s just like what happened that time with the music venue. The door wasn’t really locked. We were just made to think it was!” As soon as he said it, he knew he was on the right track. And there was evidence for that too.

CHOOSE A TRUTH BULLET

Truth Bullet #1: Monokuma File

Truth Bullet #2: Snow Machines

Truth Bullet #3: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet #4: Bloody Water

Truth Bullet #5: Peko’s Account

Truth Bullet #6: Autopsy Report

Truth Bullet #7: Blued Skin

Truth Bullet #8: Missing Hand

Truth Bullet #9: Missing Wristband

Truth Bullet #10: Sliding Lock

Truth Bullet #11: Bits of Ice

Truth Bullet #12: Treadmill Clock

Truth Bullet #13: Blood-Stained Wipe

Truth Bullet #14: Trash Can

Truth Bullet #15: Saw

Truth Bullet #16: Slashed Kimono

Truth Bullet #17: Soaked Spare Outfit

Truth Bullet #18: Endrya’s Testimony

HAJIME: So far, they’d only found a small bit of evidence related to the door itself. Only one thing directly related to that door. But if the door really hadn’t been locked, then the lock itself couldn’t
be it. Instead it had to be something the killer could use to keep the door shut. Something that wouldn’t stand out. Something so natural that they wouldn’t even have to dispose of it.

Meaning, it had to be….

Select: **Truth Bullet #11: Bits of Ice**

HAJIME: “The ice! It’s the ice!”

IBUKI: “What a chilling revelation!”

GUNDHAM: “Ice? What about the ice?”

SONIA: “Are you trying to insinuate that it was Gundham because he is the Supreme Overlord of Ice? That is foolish, Hajime!”

HAJIME: “That’s not what I’m saying! What I’m saying is that they froze the door shut.”

MIKAN: “Eeeeeek!”

TERUTERU: “F-froze the door?”

HAJIME: “Yeah. That should be possible. If they froze it, then—”

TWOGAMI: “I shall show you the folly of your reasoning.”

----------------------REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN START----------------------

Available Truth Blades:

**Truth Blade: Hole in Ice**

**Truth Blade: Blued Skin**

**Truth Blade: Soaked Spare Outfit**

**Truth Blade: Peko’s Account**

**Truth Blade: Saw**

**Truth Blade: Bits of Ice**

**Truth Blade: Missing Wristband**

**Truth Blade: Snow Machines**

TWOGAMI: “Are you seriously proposing that they froze the door shut? How would they even do something like that? The snow machines produced snow, not water. Which means, as any primary school student could tell you, that the temperature in the room was below freezing. So where would anybody get any water?”

----------------------ADVANCE----------------------

HAJIME: “A-are you serious? The whole room was on top of a frozen lake. They had access to all
the water they needed.”

TWOGAMI: “Sure, they managed to cut a hole in the ice. But then what? Are you suggesting they carried the water all the way to the door? How would they be able to do that?”

HAJIME: “I—”

TWOGAMI: “The hole wasn’t positioned anywhere near the door. We didn’t find anything at the scene that would let them bring the water there. Certainly not enough water to freeze over the door.”

------------------------RETREAT! REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN END------------------------

HAJIME: “Twogami…what are you doing?”

TWOGAMI: “This is a class trial. We need to be absolutely certain of anything and everything relating to the murder. All of our lives are at stake. If there’s not a satisfactory answer to a line of reasoning, then we cannot afford to waste time pursuing it.”

MAHIRU: “I guess that makes sense.”

TERUTERU: “There were a lot of glasses and bowls and stuff in the kitchen, right? Maybe the culprit used those to transport the water. That villain, using innocent cooking equipment for such a crime….”

KAZUICHI: “Sonia searched the kitchen, right? We can listen to her soothing voice as she tells us all about it!”

GUNDHAM: “We found nothing strange in the kitchen.”

KAZUICHI: “….”

TWOGAMI: “Of course not. I spent a significant amount of time there last night.”

HAJIME: Oh…that was true. That’s where he and Akane had found Twogami earlier that morning.

NAGITO: “What were you doing there?”

TWOGAMI: “I was hungry.”

TERUTERU: “You shoulda told me. Hmhmm! I could have whipped you up something really quick.”

IBUKI: “That sounds suspicious!”

HIYOKO: “Twogami’s story? Obviously. He’s probably the killer and tried to give himself an alibi.”

IBUKI: “Oooooh? I meant Teruteru-chan. He’s like that creepy guy who keeps showing up to all your concerts.”

TERUTERU: “How did you know?”

TWOGAMI: “I don’t care whether or not you believe me. The fact remains that nobody came into the kitchen.”
PEKO: “If you’re telling the truth.”

AKANE: “Eh? Chubby’s lying?”

HIYOKO: “Yaaay! We get to barbecue Mr. Ham Hands!”

FUYUHIKO: “We might as well discuss it. Whether he’s telling the truth or not.”

MONOKUMA: “Sounds like we have grounds for a debate!”

RYOTA: “Eh? Debate? Isn’t that what we’ve been doing?”

GUNDHAM: “Indeed. What difference can further words entice?”

MONOKUMA: “I wonder….”

ENDIRYA: “It’s a different kind of debate.”

MONOKUMA: “I just enjoy watching you little scamps tear each other apart! Ah, it warms my little bear heart. Who knows? Maybe some of you will even get so mad with each other that I won’t even need to provide another motive!”

ENDIRYA: “Assuming you all manage to survive this trial.”

KAZUICHI: “See? He said ‘you all.’ Not including him! He’s totally not a real part of this trial!”

ENDIRYA: “I said it before. I’m here to observe. What happens is up to you.”

MONOKUMA: “Whoooooooo caaaaares? Let’s get this party started!”

----------------SCRUM DEBATE START----------------

HAJIME: Trust

TWOGAMI: Kitchen

SONIA: Pots

GUNDHAM: Guard duty

RYOTA: Disguises

AKANE: Alone

MAHIRU: Rules

-------------------SCRUM DEBATE END-------------------

NAGITO: ???

PEKO: ???

FUYUHIKO: ???
IS TWOGAMI THE CULPRIT?

KAZUICHI "I don't care what anyone says. It's way too suspicious that he was in the kitchen alone."

TWOGAMI: "I admit that it's hardly a great alibi, but Akane and Hajime did find me in the kitchen."

PEKO: "Wouldn't it be suspicious that none of us on guard duty saw him?"

GUNDHAM: "As we already established, there was a large window when no one was on guard duty."

TERUTERU: "Don't the rules prohibit accessing certain areas at night anyway?"

MAHIRU: "They do, but nothing in the rules says the kitchen was one of those areas."

MIKAN: "If being alone is so suspicious, Owari was by herself in the gym too."

AKANE: "Yeah? Sure, I was alone, but I was on the treadmill. You can see that from the timer. It's a better alibi than nothing."

NAGITO: "Twogami is the only one who had access to the pots. Wouldn't that mean he's the only one who had a way to transport the water?"

SONIA: "When we investigated the kitchen, we determine none of the pots had been moved since last night. I know because I helped put them away after dinner."

HIYOKO: "Isn't he the Ultimate Imposter? Maybe he disguised himself as someone else!"

RYOTA: "That's ludicrous! You've seen how his disguises are...um...round."

FUYUHIKO: You're asking us to trust someone off of such weak evidence?"

HAJIME: "Trusting each other is the only way we're going to get through this!"

FULL COUNTER

--------------------SCRUM DEBATE END----------------------

HAJIME: "Let's stop rushing to conclusions and just talk about this!"
MIKAN: “S-so if we believe Twogami-kun was in the kitchen the whole time, then…then how did the killer lock the room? If they couldn’t move the water, I mean.”

HAJIME: “During that big debate…someone said something that caught my attention. Without access to the kitchen, there’s only one way to transport water around. I didn’t remember it until they mentioned it just now, but there was a bucket in the storage room, remember?”

IBUKI: “Did you know if you turn a bucket upside-down, you can use it as a drum? Bang bang!”

KAZUICHI: “Oh. Ah! Yeah! I remember it. I thought about using it as a toi—I mean. Yeah….”

HAJIME: “None of us paid attention to it during the investigation because it had been there even before the murder. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t used. Right?”

NAGITO: “It’s certainly possible. Noticing something so common—how extraordinarily ordinary! You must have been quite experienced in that regard!”

HAJIME: “…”

SONIA: “However, is it really possible that someone used the bucket? Can we put back items after taking them? I thought there was a rule about that.”

MIKAN: “Um…erm…if I recall, anyone could take two items….”

HAJIME: “But I know that items can be returned.” That’s right. There was proof of that fact too. Something he’d taken from the storage room that reappeared there later….

CHOOSE A TRUTH BULLET

Truth Bullet #1: Monokuma File

Truth Bullet #2: Snow Machines

Truth Bullet #3: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet #4: Bloody Water

Truth Bullet #5: Peko’s Account

Truth Bullet #6: Autopsy Report

Truth Bullet #7: Blued Skin

Truth Bullet #8: Missing Hand

Truth Bullet #9: Missing Wristband

Truth Bullet #10: Sliding Lock

Truth Bullet #11: Bits of Ice

Truth Bullet #12: Treadmill Clock

Truth Bullet #13: Blood-Stained Wipe
Truth Bullet #14: Trash Can

Truth Bullet #15: Saw

Truth Bullet #16: Slashed Kimono

Truth Bullet #17: Soaked Spare Outfit

Truth Bullet #18: Endirya’s Testimony

HAJIME: That was it! It had to be….

Select: Truth Bullet #15: Saw

HAJIME: “The saw!”

AKANE: “The…saw?”

GUNDHAM: “I see.”

MAHIRU: “Hajime, you had the saw?”

HAJIME: “I did. Last night. I took it from the storage room to keep it safe. But it had disappeared from my room at some point. Someone must have taken it and put it back.”

IBUKI: “Who’s someone? Who did it?”

HAJIME: “I—I don’t know that right now, but—”

TERUTERU: “It was the killer though. Obviously. Mah, I suppose my gentlemanly way of thinking is still going strong.”

SONIA: “So if somebody placed the saw back in the storage room, they could have done the same for the bucket.”

RYOTA: “I see! That makes sense. And that would give them a way to transport the water from the lake to the door. Which means they could have frozen the door shut.”

TWOGAMI: “Indeed. It seems I have…made an error. I will not make a habit of saying this, but I apologize, Hajime.”

HAJIME: “Ah, it’s fine.”

NAGITO: “The bits of ice you mentioned…given the snow machines being on their maximum setting, they would have been buried in the snow if they’d been there for a while, no? Meaning that it’s much more likely that they fell off from the door when you three forced it open.”

MIKAN: “That makes sense. It wouldn’t melt in a room like that, so….”

PEKO: “With this, I think we can safely deduce that that’s how the killer created this locked room mystery.”

FUYUHIKO: “Sure. But does knowing that really get us any closer to figuring out who did it?”

HAJIME: Huh?
HIYOKO: “Oh, you’re actually right for once. Broken clocks, as they say.”
FUYUHIKO: “I’ll break your clock, you little bitch.”
MAHIRU: “Hey! Stop threatening her!”
TWOGAMI: “Stop this petty squabbling. Fuyuhiko, this might help us.”
FUYUHIKO: “Eh? How?”
MONOKUMA: “Awww. But I love the petty squabbling. And the only thing I love more than petty squabbling is real squabbling! Go on, tear each other apart. Rip! Burn! Kill! Bwahahahaha!”
KAZUICHI: “Yeah, yeah, we get it already.”
NAGITO: “You’re referring to the rule, correct?”
GUNDHAM: “Rule? Which rule?”
HAJIME: “Could you mean…?”

What rule regarding how the bucket was taken might help narrow the list of suspects?

1. The nighttime rule
2. The Observer rule
3. The two-items rule
4. The no bathrooms rule

HAJIME: If understanding how the bucket was used to create the locked room mystery did help them figure out who did it, then the answer had to be…

Select C) The two-items rule

HAJIME: “You’re talking about the limit, right?”

IBUKI: “Limit?”

HAJIME: “Yeah. Endirya told us that one person could only take two items from the room. Isn’t that right?”

ENDIRYA: “That’s correct.”

HIYOKO: “Ehhhh? How does that help us?”

MAHIRU: “Ah, I think I get it. If some people already took items and still have them, then they can’t have taken the bucket. Yeah?”

PEKO: “That…would make a degree of sense.”

AKANE: “Huh? Why?”

FUYUHIKO: “Because they would have already hit the limit. Jeez. Pay attention.”

AKANE: “I am paying attention! I just…ugh.”

TWOGAMI: “Then let’s narrow down what we can. This is the word of Byakuya Togami. Well, not literally, but you know what I mean.”
Available Truth Bullets:

Truth Bullet: Bloody Water

Truth Bullet: Autopsy Report

Truth Bullet: Missing Wristband

Truth Bullet: Blood-Stained Wipe

Truth Bullet: Trash Can

Truth Bullet: Slashed Kimono

Truth Bullet: Endirya’s Testimony

TWOGAMI: “Let’s begin by figuring out who, if anyone, took things from the storage thing.”

PEKO: “Did anyone even remove anything from there? Surely they know how suspicious it would be.”

MIKAN: “U-um… I took some bandages. Some disinfectant wipes too. H-Hinata and Komaeda saw that….”

KAZUICHI: “I have a wrench and a screwdriver. They’re with me right here. Feels better to travel around with some handy tools, you know?”

RYOTA: “I-I didn’t take anything! I swear!”

HIYOKO: “You don’t have to say it like that. Kyahaha! I didn’t either. Why would I need anything in that musty old place?”

TERUTERU: “I took a packet of sunflower seeds for Gundham’s hamsters. Fry ‘em up with a little oil—hmhmhmhm!”

SONIA: “Ah! I wondered where those had come from.”

MAHIRU: “I went looking for a camera charger or a replacement battery, but they didn’t have any there.”

HAJIME: “I took the saw and a knife, which I still have. I was trying to get some of the more dangerous tools out of there.”

IBUKI: “I didn’t even know you could take stuff! Haha. Guess I wasn’t paying much attention. But if you guys see a guitar, let me know, kay?”

AKANE: “So… is that it? Is that everyone?”

GUNDHAM: “It would seem so. Kehehe. The curtain draws near. Soon this scoundrel shall be revealed!”

HAJIME: Based on everyone’s statements and all the evidence I found, someone’s argument is clearly wrong. It contradicts that thing. So all I have to do is present it!
The piece of evidence which contradicts what that person said is:

Select **Truth Bullet Slashed Kimono** with statement: **I didn’t either.**

HAJIME: “Hold on a second, Hiyoko.”

------------------------BREAK! NONSTOP DEBATE END------------------------

HAJIME: “You said you didn’t take anything from the storage room.”

HIYOKO: “Yeah? What’s wrong with that?”

HAJIME: “You told me in the storage room earlier that you didn’t wear the kimono there. But that kimono was clearly used.”

KAZUICHI: “It was?”

HAJIME: “Yeah. There were slash marks all along it, tearing away some of the fabric. And it was wet too.”

HIYOKO: “Huh? And you’re saying I did that? Like, what is this? That’s ridiculous.”

IBUKI: “Oh! It’s because she’s the only one who wears kimonos!”

SONIA: “Perhaps she wanted another one so she could practice tying the sash?”

HIYOKO: “Shut up, you dumb princess. You might have servants to do all the crap for you, but the rest of us have to actually do it ourselves. I’ve gotten much better at tying it. In fact, I can do it myself now! Isn’t that right?”

MAHURU: “Eheheh…well, you’ve certainly improved.”

MIKAN: “D-don’t worry, Saionji-san. If you just keep practicing with it, then—”

HIYOKO: “I don’t want to hear clothing advice from someone who dresses like a 100-yen store.”

MIKAN: “Eeeeh! I’m sorry!”

RYOTA: “Endirya should know, right? Who took the kimono?”

FUYUHIKO: “Not like he’d tell us anyway.”

ENDIRYA: “Indeed, I couldn’t.”

TERUTERU: “Couldn’t?”

ENDIRYA: “I was not in the storage room at the time.”

PEKO: “What?”

TWOGAMI: “Hmph. Utter nonsense. He told us earlier he was in the storage room. That’s how he could supply a time for when you finished your shift, Peko. And now he claims he wasn’t there.”

KAZUICHI: “Well, which is it?”

GUNDHAM: “Such a simple trick. Fuhaha. It’s truly sad if you can’t see past it, Kazuichi.”
MAHIRU: “Stop it, both of you. There’s no way Hiyoko took that kimono.”

HIYOKO: “Yeah! It’s probably that sword-swallowing bimbo trying to set me up again.”

PEKO: “Excuse me?”

IBUKI: “Oh yeah! Like with the gummy! I remember that. Good times.”

MAHIRU: “…."

MONOKUMA: “You know, I’m starting to think I should move on to doing this game with old people. They wouldn’t have as much ADD.”

MIKAN: “That’s not how that—”

MONOKUMA: “Your time will be running out pretty soon, you know? Are you sure this is what you want to argue about?”

TWOGAMI: “As much as I hate to side with that creature, he’s right. We should take a step back and look at the bigger picture here. Bickering with each other won’t help.”

NAGITO: “Could I say something?”

KAZUICHI: “No.”

HIYOKO: “Nah.”

AKANE: “Only if you want me to hit you!”

HAJIME: “…What is it?”

NAGITO: “I was wondering what they’d even want a kimono for. Was it necessary for the case in some way?”

PEKO: “Perhaps they needed it to wipe the blood off themselves.”

HAJIME: “…! Hold…on a second. Hadn’t he found something like that during his investigation?”

CHOOSE A TRUTH BULLET

Truth Bullet #1: Monokuma File

Truth Bullet #2: Snow Machines

Truth Bullet #3: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet #4: Bloody Water

Truth Bullet #5: Peko’s Account

Truth Bullet #6: Autopsy Report

Truth Bullet #7: Blued Skin

Truth Bullet #8: Missing Hand
HAJIME: The thing they’d found with blood on it. The one that clearly didn’t belong, located well away from the murder scene. Only one item fit that description.


HAJIME: “Hang on a moment, Peko. It’s possible that the kimono was used to wipe away the blood, as you say. But I found something else.”

GUNDHAM: “Something else?”

HAJIME: “Yeah. When Komaeda and I were investigating the gym, we found a bloody wipe in the trash can. Just one. I thought it was strange.”

FUYUHIKO: “And? What’s wrong with that?”

TWOGAMI: “I see. That is strange.”

RYOTA: “Huh? You too?”

IBUKI: “Finding a bloody wipe in your trash is like finding a fly in your soup. It’s just no good!”

TWOGAMI: “Humph. Why don’t go ahead and tell them, Hajime?”

HAJIME: “A single wipe probably wouldn’t be enough to clean off all the blood that came from severing someone’s hand. But if you used it along with the kimono, then maybe….”

SONIA: “Or the water. They did have access to it after making that hole.”

HAJIME: That was also true. With all of that, the culprit might have been able to keep enough of the blood off themselves even without showering. And now he had a pretty good idea of who might have thrown the wipe away. He didn’t want to accuse them. He didn’t want to accuse anyone. And it was still totally possible that this person wasn’t the killer. But now there was too much evidence to not at least ask.

------------------------SELECT SOMEONE------------------------
HAJIME
TWOGAMI
RYOTA
MAHIRU
HIYOKO
MIKAN
NAGITO
PEKO
SONIA
GUNDHAM
ENDIRYA
IBUKI
KAZUICHI
AKANE
TERUTERU
FUYUHIKO

HAJIME: Who threw the blood-stained wipe into the gymnasium’s trash can? And why…why would they have done that? No. He couldn’t let himself focus on that. He couldn’t get distracted now. This case…he felt like they had a near-complete understanding of how it had played out. But then…if that was true, then why did he feel so uneasy about it? Why did he feel like he was overlooking something huge? Huge enough to change everything about this case?

No. No, he was getting distracted again. For now, this was the best he could do. To find the contradiction that would lead to the truth. And to do that, he had to press this person.

Select: Mikan

HAJIME: “It has to be you!”

---------------------------SELECT SOMEONE END---------------------------

HAJIME: “Mikan, I have something I’d like to ask you.”

MIKAN: “Eeeeee? Huh? W-what is it?”

TWOGAMI: “I thought as much.”

KAZUICHI: “Huh? It’s her?”

HIYOKO: “That two-timing bitch!”
MIKAN: “N-no! You’ve got it wrong.”

HAJIME: “Calm down, everyone! I haven’t accused anyone. I just had a question.”

GUNDHAM: “A question, you say? Very well. You may ask. However! There are many things mortals such as you were never meant to know.”

MAHIRU: “He wasn’t even talking to you.”

GUNDHAM: “Kehehe. Mahiru. It seems you still have much to learn.”

MAHIRU: “Excuse me? You’re the one who needs to grow up.”

MONOKUMA: “That’s right! That’s more like it! Tear each other apart!”

SONIA: “Now, now. I believe Hajime had something he wanted to say.”

MONOKUMA: “Buzzkill.”

HAJIME: “…Yeah. Mikan, what were you doing last night?”

MIKAN: “Last night? What do you mean? When?”

FUYUHIKO: “Don’t play coy. That’s not going to work this time.”

RYOTA: “This time?”

TWOGAMI: “From what I heard about the previous game, this case bears a number of similarities to Mikan’s trial, when she murdered Ibuki and Hiyoko.”

IBUKI: “Oh. I remember that!”

HIYOKO: “Hehe. Figures she wouldn’t be clever enough to change things up.”

PEKO: “Similarities? You mean like the locked room?”

TERUTERU: “Oh yeah. Now that you mention it, I remember hearing about that. Didn’t she use super glue or something to make you think the room had been locked from the inside?”

IBUKI: “What a sticky situation!”

TERUTERU: “Yes. I suppose it was.”

TWOGAMI: “That is certainly a parallel. As is the location of the murder.”

HAJIME: “Huh?”

KAZUICHI: “Do you mean—the murder didn’t actually happen in the snow room?”

TWOGAMI: “What? No. Of course it happened there. Rack your brains a little. I meant that the freezing temperatures prevented our resident nurse from obtaining a clearer time of death.”

HIYOKO: “Hehe, she’s so busted.”

MIKAN: “P-please, wait! I didn’t do it!”

ENDIRYA: “If you didn’t do it, then what were you doing last night?”
HAJIME: Huh? Why was he…?

ENDIRYA: “Unless someone was so inspired by your last murder as to create a copy, then the circumstances here certainly warrant further questioning.”

PEKO: “Though reluctantly, I agree.”

MIKAN: “Er…um…I…”

HAJIME: “Mikan. We have someone who claims they saw you enter the gym. Where we found this bloody wipe. Is that true?”

AKANE: “What? Someone saw her?”

HAJIME: Are—are you serious?

AKANE: “Awright! So does that mean it was you, Mikan? I won’t be taken in this time. Don’t think I’ll go easy on you just because you look cute!”

HIYOKO: “Cute? Did Nekomaru hit you so hard you went blind?”

AKANE: “What did you just say?”

MIKAN: “Erm…”

NAGITO: “If I may.”

GUNDHAM: “You, again?”

TWOGAMI: “What is it, Komaeda?”

KAZUICHI: “You’d better not be trying to cover for Mikan and confusing us all again.”

MAHIRU: “What do you mean, cover for? Why are you assuming she’s guilty?”

HAJIME: “Akane, what do you mean someone saw her? You’re the one who told me you saw her.”

AKANE: “I did?”

HAJIME: “…Yes.”

AKANE: “Hmmm. I don’t—oh! Oh! That’s right. I remember now! Yeah, I was in the gym, working up an appetite, when Mikan came in.”

----------------------FLASHBACK----------------------

AKANE: “Eh? Who’s there?”

MIKAN: “EEEEEEEEK!”

AKANE: “Yo, Mikan. What’s going on?”

MIKAN: “I’m sorry! I didn’t know anyone was in here. Heehee, you can’t hear the equipment in here from outside.”

MIKAN: “You didn’t have to stop running for me. I don’t want to mess up your workout. Exercise is really important to maintaining good health.”

AKANE: “Hmm. That’s true. And it’s a great way to work up an appetite. Heh. I hope that grubby chef dude wakes up soon. I’m starving.”

MIKAN: “Eh? What are you—?”

AKANE: “Huh? I’m going back to my workout, obviously.”

MIKAN: “O-okay.”

---------------FLASHBACK END---------------------

AKANE: “I think that’s what happened.”

KAZUICHI: “You think?”

AKANE: “Eheh, I don’t pay a whole lot of attention to people with low fighting potential.”

KAZUICHI: “You didn’t even ask her what she was doing there. Great. That’s totally useless.”

AKANE: “Useless, huh? You just back off. I’ll come over there and snap you in half!”

FUYUHIKO: “Cut it out, both of you.”

NAGITO: “Tsumiki, is that what happened?”

MIKAN: “Um. Um. Er. Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

TWOGAMI: “A likely story. Why did you even go to the gym in the first place?”

MIKAN: “....”

PEKO: “Well?”

GUNDHAM: “She does not need to speak. Hmhmhm. Indeed, the truth has already arrived. Even my subordinates could deduce this. Clearly she went to the gymnasium in order to dispose of the evidence of her crime.”

MIKAN: “Um...u-um...”

NAGITO: “I think there’s a question we all need to take another at.”

RYOTA: “What is it?”

HIYOKO: “He doesn’t have anything to say. He’s just messing with us again.”

SONIA: “But he did say he had a comment earlier.”

TERUTERU: “If it’s something important, we should really consider it. You can’t leave a central ingredient out of a recipe. The whole thing would be ruined!”

NAGITO: “Let’s assume that Tsumiki did go to the gym to dispose of the bloody wipe. That would mean she killed Nidai, correct? I don’t know about you guys. I mean, there’s no way someone like me could know what people like you were thinking. But the last time we talked about Tsumiki’s case, she managed to kill a sick Mioda and one of the only people smaller than herself.”

TERUTERU: “Eh?”

IBUKI: “Yeah, so what’s wrong with that?”

NAGITO: “Doesn’t it seem strange? If the cause of death really was…oh. What did we decide the cause of death was again?”

FUYUHIKO: “We didn’t. You bastards kept shutting me down.”

PEKO: “If it were drowning, there’s no way Tsumiki could have held Nidai underwater long enough to drown him.”

KAZUICHI: “Ah! That’s true. That guy was really strong.”

AKANE: “Hell yeah he was! No way a shrimp like her coulda done it. No offense.”

HIYOKO: “Shrimp?”

MAHIRU: “She wasn’t talking to you….”

RYOTA: “What about poison? She’s the Ultimate Nurse, right? If any of us were to use poison, it would be her. N-not that I think she would! Just…we have to consider it, right?”

HAJIME: “Now hold on a minute.”

SONIA: “Hmm? What is it, Hajime?”

HAJIME: “If we follow that line of reasoning, there’s no one who could have held Nekomaru under the water.” Except possibly Izuru, but…no. There was no way that had happened.

MAHIRU: “And we’re assuming he was…struggling the whole time. He could have been knocked out first.”

MIKAN: “B-but there were signs of that. There were no bumps on the back of his head or anything. No lines or bruises around his neck.”

FUYUHIKO: “That does make it hard to knock someone out.”

MONOKUMA: “I’ll say!”

ENDIRYA: “Shut up.”

IBUKI: “It could have been poison. Perhaps someone laced his dinner with drugs! Some people in my old band did things like that, but that gave them energy rather than knocked them out.”

TERUTERU: “Nobody touched the dinner! Nobody would do such a thing!”

TWOGAMI: “Besides, we saw the storage room supplies. There wasn’t anything they could have used to drug the food.”

AKANE: “Mmm. So then…what’s left?”

HAJIME: That—that seemed like a truly fitting question. If Nekomaru really hadn’t been knocked out, then he could only have been drowned by force. Or committed suicide. Which meant the killer
had to be him…or Nekomaru. Was that it?

Was that really…it?

CLASS TRIAL SUSPEND!
Chapter Summary

The class trial concludes

Chapter Notes

Finally, after Lord knows how long, I'm back to finish up this class trial. No promises on when the next entry will come out, but that one will wrap up the post-trial aftermath/explanation/execution. It'll also have a neat little event in it, so I look forward to it.

I don't know if any of my original readers are still around. If you are - thank you. Thank you. I don't deserve you guys, and I'm eternally grateful. I don't want to get into the laundry list of what kept me away for so long. You guys don't need to hear me whine about that stuff. It would just sound like excuses anyway, and you all deserve better. I never should have left you all hanging for so long. So if you're all gone - well, I understand that. I felt like I needed to put this out anyway.

To anyone reading, old or new, hope you enjoy. You're amazing.

Let's do this.

MONOKUMA: “You know…this group seems to be a lot slower this time. Maybe they’re out of practice? Like—just pick someone already. Jeez. But don’t worry. That’s why your old pal Monokuma is here! We’re gonna whip these kids back into shape. Should take a few more murders is all. You know, I’m always surprised by how few people consider murder as an option. It’s a great disciplinary tool! Is someone acting out of line? Just murder them! Parents across the world recommend it. Your kid’ll never act out again! Bwahahaha!

CLASS TRIAL RESUME

HAJIME: “…”

TWOGAMI: “…”

IBUKI: “…”

NAGITO: “Huh? It sure got quiet in here. Did I confuse you all? Ah, I can’t believe it. Letting trash like me go on and on…how horrible.”

HAJIME: “…Komaeda.”

NAGITO: “Hmm?”

HAJIME: “Do you…do you have any idea what might have happened?”
KAZUICHI: “You’re relying on him?”

IBUKI: “Ooooh, are you accusing him?”

HAJIME: “It’s not that. I’m just—!”

NAGITO: “Ah...does everyone actually need help from scum like me? Even after all the other trials. Mhm. Well, there’s really not much point in focusing on the past. They say hindsight leads to clear vision, but there are some things that just can’t be seen.”

FUYUHIKO: “…So, in other words, you have no idea either?”

PEKO: “It sounds that way to me.”

RYOTA: “Maybe....”

MIKAN: “Hmm?”

RYOTA: “Maybe his—I mean, Nekomaru’s—forbidden action really did have something to do with it.”

MAHIRU: “Awww, this again.”

GUNDHAM: “It seems the impasse has resurfaced.”

AKANE: “Huh? What do you mean?”

ENDIRYA: “I believe she’s referring to the fact that we already established that no one had any way of knowing whether the wristband’s poison or drowning was the cause of death.”

RYOTA: “I...I guess the body would look similar either way. It could be one. But it could also be the other.”

HIYOKO: “Oh, how helpful.”

SONIA: “Hiyoko, I understand how you feel. But I do not think your sarcasm is helping anything.”

HIYOKO: “Humph!”

TWOGAMI: “Enough of your petty bickering. Why don’t we look examine that possibility again? Perhaps someone will have said something actually useful.”

------------------NONSTOP DEBATE START------------------

Available Truth Bullets:

Truth Bullet: Bloody Water

Truth Bullet: Autopsy Report

Truth Bullet: Missing Wristband

Truth Bullet: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet: Slashed Kimono
RYOTA: “The cause of death could be either drowning or poisoning.”
MIKAN: “But the **only poison available** would be the wristband’s.”
AKANE: “I already told ya. There’s no way Nekomaru would commit suicide! It’s just impossible!”
KAZUICHI: “You did say that, but….”
ENDIRYA: “Perhaps some sort of trap was set up then?”
TWOGAMI: “I don’t recall seeing any evidence of a trap.”
PEKO: “Indeed, we said there were **no other wounds** on his body. As long as that’s the case, I can’t see how someone could take him by surprise.”
NAGITO: “Perhaps there might be a clue in the order of events.”
MAHIRU: “Huh? The order of events?”
TERUTERU: “We already know that though…right? Someone killed Nekomaru. Maybe they poisoned or drowned him. **Then they cut off his hand** to hide the cause of death.”
SONIA: “It is so horrible.”
GUNDHAM: “Indeed. Such mutilation is unforgivable. To scar such a noble man—and in such a cowardly way too.”
FUYUHIKO: “Didn’t you leave him **hanging from a door handle**?”
IBUKI: “The timing should be important too. He can’t have come in on the wrong measure! Kah, that would ruin the whole song.”
AKANE: “Mmmm. If I recall, it was after Peko’s shift. Right?”
TWOGAMI: “Indeed. **Peko did not see anyone** during her watch. That means it had to be after she left.”
HIYOKO: “Are you trying to say Peko’s lying?”
FUYUHIKO: “Shut up, bastard!”
HAJIME: What was it…what was it. He felt like he was missing something very basic. What was it Komaeda had said? The order of events? That seemed like a logical enough starting point. Peko
should have been on duty. And she went to get Nekomaru. He’d been in his room then. And he’d gone on to stand guard. Sometime early in the morning. They knew that much. So what was it? What piece of evidence helped explained what happened after that? He went to the Snow Room. Somehow he died. His hand was removed. The killer made the room a locked room. The order of events….

Well, there was one thing that seemed inconsistent. Meaning the contradiction had to be….

Select: Truth Bullet: **Bloody Water** with statement: **Then they cut off his hand.**

HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”

----------------NONSTOP DEBATE END------------------------

HAJIME: “That’s it. That’s what was wrong with the order of events.”

TERUTERU: “What? What’s wrong?”

IBUKI: “Oh, oh? I knew Hajime-chan would think of something! It must have been all that head-banging helping his blood flow! Haha!”

SONIA: “I…do not think so.”

HAJIME: “If they drowned Nekomaru first, and then cut off his hand to confuse the cause of death, it’s strange that so much blood ended up in the water.”

AKANE: “Huh? Are you trying to say someone cut off his hand first? No way he’d let that happen!”

TWOGAMI: “Could it have leaked in?”

PEKO: “That does sound possible. But there was a lot of it in the water.”

MIKAN: “With that much blood, it seems more likely that he was in the water after his hand was severed.”

MAHIRU: “Not just that, but…ugh.”


MAHIRU: “Nothing. Just…I just thought about how horrible it must have been. But—anyway. If the blood leaked from his body into the lake, it would leave more of a trail, wouldn’t it? Whereas if he’d been in the lake first, the blood would have splattered everywhere.”

IBUKI: “Ah! Yes! That makes sense to me.”

GUNDHAM: “But what pattern did such vital-to-life liquid create?”

KAZUICHI: “Just say ‘blood,’ dude.”

SONIA: “Does anyone remember what it looked like?”

RYOTA: “I think it was…excuse me. I think it was splattered everywhere.”

MONOKUMA: “Are you sure….”
FUYUHIKO: “Tch...the fuck are you butting in for?”

MONOKUMA: “I felt lonely.”

ENDIRYA: “....”

AKANE: “Just shut up already, you overstuffed toy! Dammit. Trying to make a joke out of this. Messing around with everyone. Alright! I’ve decided! I’m going to punch you!”

HIYOKO: “She’s really quite stupid, isn’t she?”

AKANE: “Shut up!”

TWOGAMI: “So about the blood. Weren’t any of you paying attention?”

MIKAN: “W—well, I was looking more at the body. I think that it was mostly in the water and around the hole. But there definitely wasn’t a trail.”

TERUTERU: “That’s what I remember too.”

FUYUHIKO: “If he’d been dead before, and the blood just leaked from his stump, then sure, there would have been a trail. That makes sense. But—”

PEKO: “If he was pulled out after, there should have been a trail too. Not a neat one, perhaps, but certainly more of a trail than just leaving him in would have left.”

HAJIME: …? Wait. Wait a minute.

NAGITO: “Hmm? Hinata, have you noticed something?”

RYOTA: “Hajime?”

HAJIME: “I was just thinking. There wasn’t any evidence of a trap being laid. And Nekomaru wasn’t knocked out beforehand. Right, Mikan?”

MIKAN: “I—I um...I didn’t see any other injuries or any bumps on the back of his head, s-so....”

TWGOAMI: “The Monokuma File also didn’t mention any other injuries. Correct!”

MONOKUMA: “That’s right! Only the missing hand.”

KAZUICHI: “So? What does that mean?”

HAJIME: “If we assume Nekomaru’s hand was cut off beforehand, why did the killer bring him back out of the water? Or did they leave him there and Nekomaru dragged himself out before—”

As he said that, the full horror of that last scenario hit him. Had Nekomaru been left alone to die... again? Had he struggled in vain to live...again? Could something that cruel have really happened? Of course it could, in theory. The killing game itself had been cruelty. This mess was cruelty. But even so....

MAHIRU: “…Oh, God.”

AKANE: “I can’t believe this. And whoever did it’s just sitting here, acting like one of us! You better come forward right now or else!”
ENDIRYA: “I think you’ve all overlooked something else.”

HAJIME: …Huh?

TERUTERU: “Overlooked? What do you mean?”

GUNDHAM: “Could it be? You possess not just the All-Seeing Eye but the Staff that Dispels Illusion?”

SONIA: “What is it that we have overlooked?”

AKANE: “You better tell us right now!”

ENDIRYA: “Earlier you assumed that the hand had been removed to conceal the cause of death. I think that should have been recognized as patently untrue. But now that you’re viewing the order of events differently, there is another reason for cutting off Nekomaru’s hand.”

HAJIME: If that were the case….If cutting off the hand came before Nekomaru’s death – then there was only one thing Hajime could think of.

What would be another reason to remove Nekomaru’s hand?

1. To mix up the cause of death
2. To mess up the crime scene
3. To weaken his ability to fight back
4. To hide evidence

Select: C) To weaken his ability to fight back

HAJIME: “They wanted to stop Nekomaru from fighting back.”

AKANE: “That coward!”

PEKO: “I see. Removing a limb is an effective way to weaken a person.”

KAZUICHI: “In that case, Mikan totally could have drowned Nekomaru!”

MIKAN: “E-eh?”

KAZUICHI: “Earlier we said the only reason it couldn’t be Mikan was because she lacked the strength. But if Nekomaru only had one hand, it’s a different story. And she’s a nurse! She could totally remove his hand.”

TWOGAMI: “That does sound possible.”

HIYOKO: “We already knew she tried to dispose of that bloody wipe. Hah! It’s fitting that she was exposed for trying to throw away trash.”

MIKAN: “B-but I didn’t kill him! I really—really—didn’t. Please believe me!”

SONIA: “I…I do not want to believe it. But I do not want to fall for this again.”

GUNDHAM: “Indeed. Her offensive power is greater than her physical form suggests.”

MIKAN: “I—I—I don’t…. .”
RYOTA: “Mikan…why aren’t you defending yourself?”

AKANE: “Huh? Are we saying it was Mikan again? Well, if you’re sure…!”

-----------------------NONSTOP DEBATE START-----------------------

Available Truth Bullets:

Truth Bullet: Bits of Ice

Truth Bullet: Snow Machines

Truth Bullet: Treadmill Clock

Truth Bullet: Endirya’s Testimony

Truth Bullet: Sliding Lock

Truth Bullet: Monokuma File

Truth Bullet: Missing Hand

Truth Bullet: Saw

Truth Bullet: Soaked Spare Outfit

TERUTERU: “Clearly she’s the killer!”

HIYOKO: “Yeah! She got rid of that blood-stained wipe after all! Haha, she’s such trash!”

FUYUHIKO: “Not to mention that this case looks a lot like the last time she killed. Even if she was infected with the Despair Disease.”

HIYOKO: “That’s because she’s such an unimaginative pigshit that she had to copy herself!”

MAHIRU: “Hiyoko, please. Enough.”

MIKAN: “But…I’m really, really not the killer. I couldn’t have cut off Nekomaru’s hand.”

IBUKI: “Ibuki agrees! There’s no way Mikan-chan would do something like this.”

TWOGAMI: “Aren’t you the person she killed last time?”

RYOTA: “I don’t want to believe it’s her either. But if that’s what the evidence is saying… then….”

SONIA: “She is the Ultimate Nurse. I think she would be able to cut off someone’s hand.”

GUNDHAM: “Simple flesh and blood is often so frail. After slicing it away, she left Nekomaru to drown in that bloody water.”

NAGITO: “….”

ENDIRYA: “Then have you reached a decision?”
HAJIME: Wait a minute. Something that person said wasn’t right. It should have been a little more difficult than that. And if the tool used was what he thought it was, then that meant…that meant it had to be….


HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”

--------------------NONSTOP DEBATE END----------------------

HAJIME: “There’s no way she could have sliced off his hand. The weapon in question was a saw, remember? The same saw that I took from the storage room only to see it reappear there later?”

IBUKI: “See the saw? You saw the saw? A seesaw? You have to beware the seesaw effect, Hajime-chan!”

MAHIRU: “What are you talking about?”

AKANE: “I don’t really get it. What’s the big difference?”

PEKO: “You cannot slice with a saw. That would require a bladed weapon. Correct?”

HAJIME: “Well, yeah.”

NAGITO: “So if Hinata’s the one who took the saw from the storage room, the question becomes who took it from Hajime’s room. Who had that opportunity?”

KAZUICHI: “Anyone who went on guard duty could have taken it, yeah?”

SONIA: “I do not think so. Hajime, you spent the night in your own room, correct?”

HAJIME: “I—yeah? Where else would I go?”

SONIA: “As I recall, you were going around and telling everyone about the plan to set up guard duty.”

HIYOKO: “Oh yeah! I remember that!”

RYOTA: “I do too. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I guess it didn’t work out that way, huh?”

FUYUHIKO: “And what’s wrong with that? He went back to his room once he was done, yeah?”

HAJIME: “I spent a little time in the lobby and the gym, when I was telling Komaeda. But yes, essentially.”

PEKO: “Did you check?”

HAJIME: “Eh?”

PEKO: “When you got back to your room. Did you check to see if the saw was still there?”

HAJIME: “Well…no. But I stayed in the room after that. No one else had a chance to come it.”

SONIA: “So all we have to do is figure out who could have taken the saw during that time Hajime was away.”
GUNDHAM: “Fuhuhu. An astute deduction.”

TWOGAMI: “Is it?”

MAHIRU: “Huh?”

TWOGAMI: “I hate to be the one to say this. But I think we might be making an unnecessary jump in logic here.”

AKANE: “And what jump would that be? Eh? If you don’t hurry up and say it—”

NAGITO: “You’re referring to the possibility that no one took the saw at all?”

HAJIME: …Huh?

TWOGAMI: “Indeed.”

PEKO: “If nobody took the weapon, then are you suggesting Hajime used it himself?”

TERUTERU: “Wh-what?”

KAZUICHI: “Eh? Huh? But Hajime wouldn’t…I mean…right?”

HAJIME: “Of course not! I wouldn’t do that!”

TWOGAMI: “I apologize for pressing the matter, but I’m simply trying to be impartial.”

RYOTA: “But….”

TWOGAMI: “I understand the necessity of trusting one another. Especially after everything that has happened. But I haven’t seen any class trials before this. Indeed, I’ve never been a part of this process. So I have to make sure. I may have relinquished my position as leader. But I need to make the new leader is even more capable.”

HAJIME: …Huh? What? What in the world is he talking about? Does he really suspect me that much?

TWOGAMI: “Hajime. I understand that you have given everyone else many reasons to believe in you. So if you can prove it, show me now. You took the saw. You’ve even admitted as much. Why couldn’t you have used it?”

-------------------NONSTOP DEBATE START--------------

Truth Bullet: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet: Monokuma File

Truth Bullet: Bloody Water

Truth Bullet: Treadmill Clock

Truth Bullet: Missing Wristband

Truth Bullet: Saw

Truth Bullet: Hole in Ice
TWOGAMI: “We know that Hajime took the saw from the storage room.”

TERUTERU: “He took a knife too! I remember him saying that.”

MAHIRU: “The rules said that we could only take two items from the storage room.”

KAZUICHI: “Yeah! I still have my two! Right here! Just like earlier.”

HIYOKO: “No one asked you, you walking banana.”

NAGITO: “So what you’re saying is, that since Hajime took the saw, he must have been the one to use it?”

IBUKI: “Did he use it like a seesaw?”

FUYUHIKO: “Stop.”

PEKO: “Saying that it was stolen…that does seem like a convenient excuse.”

AKANE: “Hajime…if you used that saw, I’m gonna saw you in half!”

MIKAN: “Th-that sounds scary!”

TWOGAMI: “You all assumed someone stole it from Hajime. But he could have easily used it himself. He had all the time he needed to set this up.”

HAJIME: It sounds as if…people were beginning to doubt him. Even after all of the class trials they’d been through before. And how he and Izuru had worked to save so many of their classmates and bring them back from the virtual world. But even so. It was something Chiaki had said best. And back in Mikan’s case, no less. Belief and doubt…were not necessarily opposites. So if he needed to demonstrate that he hadn’t used the saw, then he needed that it had been taken from him. Or that he didn’t have time to use it.

HAJIME: In that case….

Select: Truth Bullet: Hole in Ice with statement: Had all the time he needed.

HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”

--------------------------NONSTOP DEBATE END----------------------------

HAJIME: “We have to remember that the saw wasn’t only used to remove Nekomaru’s hand. It was also used to cut a large hole in the frozen lake.”

TWOGAMI: “And?”

AKANE: “Yeah. Even I understand that much. What are you trying to say?”

FUYUHIKO: “As long as we’re taking this stupid idea seriously, than Twogami has a point. Sorry, Hajime. But I don’t see how a hole being cut into the ice means you weren’t the one who did it.”

HAJIME: “I’m getting to that. We established the order of guards on sentry duty, remember? Peko,
Fuyuhiko, Nekomaru, and Gundham. And – yes, me. Peko took a double shift, right?"  
PEKO: “That is correct.”  
HAJIME: “And then you went back to get Nekomaru, and both you and Fuyuhiko saw him leave?”  
FUYUHIKO: “Yeah….”  

HAJIME: “So between the time Peko left, which was around 12:30 according to Endirya, and Akane’s gym trip and her time on the treadmill, we know that whatever happened took based between 12:30 and 3, right? We found the body before 4, according to the Monokuma file.”  
HIYOKO: “You’re believing Endirya? I thought we agreed that sounded suspicious.”  
HAJIME: “…Yes. I believe his testimony.”  
TERUTERU: “Okay, but—what does any of this have to do with that big nasty hole?”  
NAGITO: “Are you referring to the fact that the lake hadn’t re-frozen?”  
SONIA: “Oh! I understand!”  

HAJIME: “That’s right. If I’d cut a hole in the ice too far ahead of time, it would have re-frozen. Maybe not completely, but at least a little. Especially with those snow machines still blowing and how cold it was in there.”  

TWOGAMI: “Humph. That’s wrong. Allow me to provide you with an education.”  

Available Truth Bullets:  

Truth Bullet: Blood-Stained Wipe  
Truth Bullet: Snow Machines  
Truth Bullet: Saw  
Truth Bullet: Peko’s Account  
Truth Bullet: Autopsy Report  
Truth Bullet: Sliding Lock  
Truth Bullet: Soaked Spare Outfit  
Truth Bullet: Missing Hand  

TWOGAMI: “You say that the lake would have re-frozen if you carved the hole. Perhaps that’s the case. Nonetheless, you knew the order of guard duty. In fact, it was your plan.”  

HAJIME: “Eh? What are you trying to say?”  

TWOGAMI: “I’m saying you could have waited until Peko was finished with her shift before
heading out yourself. I admit that the possibility is unlikely. But it remains a possibility nonetheless. Unless you can demonstrate that there’s no way you could have done this, we must consider it.

HAJIME: “I didn’t know Peko was going to take two shifts. Even then, I set myself up as the last person to take a shift. If I left my room earlier, I would have been seen by a sentry on my way to the snow room.”

--------------------ADVANCE----------------------

TWOGAMI: “Perhaps. But what if Nekomaru was that sentry? What if he did see you – and let you pass exactly because he trusted you? Suddenly your excuse looks flimsy.”

HAJIME: “You—really think I would do that?”

TWOGAMI: “I told you. It’s a possibility. If you cannot prove your own innocence here, how can we trust you to lead a class trial? Since you cannot provide anything that proves you couldn’t have used the saw, then I have no other choice.”

HAJIME: He…saw. So that’s what Twogami, the Ultimate Imposter, was doing. He wasn’t wrong. Trying to find the truth often required pain. Hardship. Sacrifice. Wasn’t that how he’d been to figure out Nagito’s case? Even if it had all been a setup, like the other boy had told him in the library. Twogami was refusing to take the easy way out of simply trusting Hajime. And even had he wanted to, it was difficult to blame him. Not because he distrusted Izuru, exactly. But the other had been quiet for so long…nonetheless, this was up to him. If he didn’t, then he’d never be able to convince the others to go along with finding the real culprit. He couldn’t doubt himself now. It had been one thing to say that on the island. But here, doubting himself meant that he and everyone else would die.

HAJIME: So to prove that he couldn’t have used the saw in the way described….

Select: **Truth Bullet: Soaked Spare Outfit** with statement: **Cannot provide anything**

HAJIME: “Allow me to cut through your words!”

------------------------BREAK! REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN END------------------------

HAJIME: “Yeah. I’ll give you something.”

TWOGAMI: “Oh? What do you have to offer?”

HAJIME: “Remember the soaked spare outfit in the storage room. And the slashed kimono for that matter. And even the bucket, since we concluded those objects were all used for the murder.”

IBUKI: “You mean the upside-down drum!”

SONIA: “I think you could find a better drum than that….”

MAHIRU: “Yeah, we decided all of those were used. What’s wrong with that?”

HAJIME: “Isn’t that weird? Endirya told us that one person could only take two objects. Isn’t that right?”

ENDIRYA: “That’s correct.”
NAGITO: “Say, Monokuma…Endirya told us he wasn’t in the storage room when the kimono was taken.”

MONOKUMA: “Are you sure he said that? You really shouldn’t listen to half of what he says. I never do.”

NAGITO: “…Say that someone who’d already taken two items went back when he wasn’t there. Would they be allowed to take a third?”

MONOKUMA: “….”

ENDIRYA: “You can tell them. It’s vital information for securing a fair trial process.”

MONOKUMA: “A fair trial?”

ENDIRYA: “You know what I mean.”

MAHIRU: “Hey…what are you two talking about?”

MONOKUMA: “Well, obviously, the trial process. I guess what they say about gingers is true.”

HIYOKO: “Hey! Don’t you insult Mahiru you overstuffed dollar-store reject!”

MONOKUMA: “And blondes too!”

KAZUICHI: “Hey! Not all blondes are like that. Miss Sonia’s highly intelligent!”

GUNDHAM: “It seems even a broken clock speaks correctly but twice a day.”

FUYUHIKO: “You sure you want to bring up broken clocks?”

AKANE: “Well? Monokuma, what’s your answer?”

HAJIME: Akane…she’s really….

MONOKUMA: “Ah. You guys are no fun. Fine. I wouldn’t allow someone who’d taken two items to come take a third.”

KAZUICHI: “So that would mean Hajime can’t have taken a third item!”

HAJIME: “Precisely. And since the spare outfit was soaked, we know it must have been in water at some point. There’s nothing in the storage room that could do that.”

AKANE: “So—so…um. That means the wet clothes were taken too, right?”

SONIA: “They probably were not wet at the time, but yes, I believe so.”

HAJIME: “That would mean three items were taken. Which means I couldn’t have used the saw.”

RYOTA: “Hold on.”

MIKAN: “H-hold on?”

RYOTA: “It’s possible to put an item back though, right? And then take another one?”

TERUTERU: “What makes you think that? There’s no way that could be allowed, right? No refunds for your meals!”
HIYOKO: “No, the otaku is totally right! I’m surprised too.”

RYOTA: “O-otaku?”

NAGITO: “Hinata makes a good point though. If he did switch out the saw, why wouldn’t he just take it and keep it in his room at the end? That way, he could claim he still had two items. Wouldn’t that be the more logical thing for him to do if he were the murderer?”

TWOGAMI: “We assigned people to search the rooms…that’s not a guarantee of anything.”

FUYUHIKO: “Did he know you would do that?”

TWOGAMI: “…That is a decent point.”

GUNDHAM: “How foolish this is. I have no need of mortal items to enhance my powers.”

HIYOKO: “But what if someone did swap items? I mean, someone even took one of my kimonos and got it all slashed up.”

MAHIRU: “That’s right. At least four items from the storage room were used, right? The kimono, the spare clothes, the saw, and the bucket?”

MIKAN: “Um…umm…the disinfectant wipes too.”

PEKO: “Why would you say that? Isn’t that just incriminating yourself too?”

MIKAN: “EEEEEEEEEEK! I’m sorry!”

NAGITO: “If I recall, Tsumiki also removed some bandages from the storage room.”

TERUTERU: “So it’s just like we said earlier? It’s really her?”

HAJIME: “No. I don’t think so.”

TWOGAMI: “No? What do you mean?”

HAJIME: “Thinking along those lines, I realized something. Mikan never had a chance to take the saw from my room.”

MONOKUMA: “Are you surrrrre about that?”

FUYUHIKO: “Shut the fuck up.”

HAJIME: “I am sure. Ibuki came to my room last night.”

KAZUICHI: “What?”

TERUTERU: “Huh?”

MAHIRU: “You perverts.”

HAJIME: “It wasn’t like that! She just came to talk. And when she left, she went off to find Mikan and Kazuichi. Right?”

KAZUICHI: “Oh. Yeah! That’s true.”

IBUKI: “Heck yeah! The band always needs to practice! No matter where we are!”
MIKAN: “I can’t even p-play an instrument. Ehhehehe. But they still wanted me around.”

IBUKI: “That’s cause you’re my Mikan-chan! And you’re my Soda-chan! It’s healthy like diet soda!”

MIKAN: “Th-that’s not—!”

PEKO: “But what you’re saying is that the three of them were together while you were away?”

HAJIME: “I think so. Right, Ibuki?”

IBUKI: Ya-ffirmative!”

TWOGAMI: “And how long were the three of you together?”

IBUKI: “Time flies when you’re having fun!”

AKANE: “Fun? Oi. What are you trying to say—?”

KAZUICHI: “Maybe—two hours or so?”

FUYUHIKO: “Everyone here can attest to Hajime meeting with you to fill you in on the sentry plan. Yeah?”

HIYOKO: “Yeah.”

RYOTA: “I…remember that.”

SONIA: “I wish it had succeeded. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

ENDIRYA: “And how long would you say that took, Hajime?”

HAJIME: “I spent a little time in the lobby, but I’m sure it wasn’t more than an hour.”

TERUTERU: “So that hour’s where we have to find our suspect, right? You can’t leave the oven unattended longer than that without burning everything. It’s the same here too. If someone needed to take the saw, that’s the only time they could have done it.”

KAZUICHI: “The number of items used suggests the killer had to be able to swap out items. But if there’s only one time when they could have accessed the saw, then that’s where we should look. I guess that makes sense. Like I said, I was with Mikan and Ibuki.”

HIYOKO: “I was with Big Sis Mahiru! After tight-pants Hajime came to talk anyway.”

HAJIME…Just let that pass.

GUNDHAM: “After my time in the lobby talking with Nekomaru, I stopped by the dominion of the Dark Queen. We resided together for a time.”

KAZUICHI: “Eh?”

SONIA: “Please do not say such things! I will – that is, I…ugh!”


IBUKI: “Oh? Oh? Didn’t Fuyuhiko-chan and Peko-chan spend some time together too?”
PEKO: “After my shift, that is true. But I was not with him beforehand.”

NAGITO: “But they both saw Nidai off. So I think we can safely rule them out.”

ENDIRYA: “Does anyone else wish to say they spent time together?”

TERUTERU: “…."

RYOTA: “…."

HAJIME: “…."

MONOKUMA: “Is that it? None of the rest of you spent any time together? Geez, you’re all so anti-social. You might as well just off each other already. That’d be way more interesting!”

AKANE: “We’re already having a trial! How dare you…say we should just kill each other? Just like that. There’s no way. Just like I can’t believe someone would do this again…take him away again.”

HAJIME: “…."

GUNDHAM: “Life is not something to be so easily wasted.”

SONIA: “Hajime, you were moving through the hall, going from room to room and talking to people right? We were all roomed in one hallway, so you could see the whole thing if you weren’t in one of the rooms. Did you go in any of the rooms?”

HAJIME: “Only Fuyuhiko’s, at the very beginning. For everyone else, I stayed in the hall.”

RYOTA: “And you didn’t see anyone during that time?”

HAJIME: “No. Though I guess I spent a few minutes alone in the lobby too.”

AKANE: “I don’t really get it, but…that means we can narrow the hour even further, right?”

TWOGAMI: “Correct. Not a bad observation, Akane.”

AKANE: “Awright! So whoever left their room when Hajime wasn’t looking is the culprit, right?”

HAJIME: “Well, I wouldn’t say that. You left to go to the gym. And Gundham came to see me in the lobby.”

TERUTERU: “Doesn’t that mean one of them could have taken it?”

IBUKI: “But Gundham-chan was with the Dark Queen! Ooooooh!”

HIYOKO: “So it was the big-breasted-bimbo then?”

NAGITO: “I don’t think so. Sorry, I know I’m interrupting. But I went with Owari to the gym. She was so kind to let someone like me tag along.”

MIKAN: “Really?”

AKANE: “Did I do that…? Aw, yeah. Something like that.”

NAGITO: “Well, it was less letting me tag along and more just not telling me to leave. Plus, Hinata found us there not long after.”
HAJIME: “Right. That’s true.”

MAHIRU: “So that would mean the only people left are Ryota, Teruteru, and Twogami?”

PEKO: “Unless you wish to include Endirya, then yes.”

TWOGAMI: “I think we should rule him out if we’re ever going to get anywhere.”

HAJIME: …Huh?

TERUTERU: “A saw…? Heh…I never even seen that saw.”

IBUKI: “You never saw the seesaw?”

RYOTA: “I didn’t do it either! I know that’s not evidence, but you have to believe me!”

TWOGAMI: “Calm down, both of you. Heh. So this is the process of a class trial. Having the tables turn and turn like this.”

FUYUHIKO: “That’s—kind of a creepy thing to say. Did you decide to impersonate Komaeda?”

NAGITO: “Aha, really? I can’t believe someone would want to copy me!”

KAZUICHI: “Isn’t there any way we can narrow it down further? I don’t want to take a one-in-three shot!”

NAGITO: “There is one thing.”

KAZUICHI: “AAARGH! Not you! You’re just going to confuse us all!”

----------------NONSTOP DEBATE START-----------------

Available Truth Bullets:

Truth Bullet: Endirya’s Testimony

Truth Bullet: Monokuma File

Truth Bullet: Missing Hand

Truth Bullet: Bits of Ice

Truth Bullet: Snow Machines

Truth Bullet: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet: Missing Wristband

Truth Bullet: Blued Skin

Truth Bullet: Bloody Water

NAGITO: “There is one thing we could look at. To narrow down suspects, I mean.”
GUNDHAM: “And what would that be?”

IBUKI: “Kyaah! All the alibis, maybe!”

SONIA: “Who had the time to take the saw…and who had the time to kill Nekomaru?”

MAHIRU: “There can’t be that many people who could do both.”

AKANE: “So who? Who was it? Show yourself already, coward!”

HIYOKO: “Akane, you keep getting all worked up. You eat too much?”

AKANE: “Shut up!”

MIKAN: “Um…about narrowing down suspects. Are you talking about the cause of death?”

RYOTA: “Maybe it has something to with the suspects themselves?”

PEKO: “Aren’t you one of them?”

FUYUHIKO: “Mitarai, Teruteru, and large Byakuya. Right?”

IBUKI: “Large only because he’s full of love!”

KAZUICHI: “I, ah, don’t think that’s how that works.”

GUNDHAM: “Their physical forms are irrelevant. What matters is the opportunity.”

AKANE: “And the motive. Who would do something so horrible?”

TWOGAMI: “If you’re so certain it’s one of us, then let’s see what you’ve got. Show me your evidence!”

HAJIME: A clue they could use to further narrow down the list of suspects. Did something like that…really exist? There had to be a hint in there somewhere. It was Komaeda who’d said that, after all. And while that could mean any number of things, at the very least, it meant that it mattered. It held some relevance in some way. As difficult as the white-haired boy was to figure out sometimes, that was something Hajime had complete confidence in. Thinking about it that way…it’s a little warped, isn’t it? He had to tell himself to trust Komaeda in other situations. But when it came to trials like this, even if Komaeda threw out bits of information to confuse everyone, he wasn’t someone to be underestimated. If it was one of the three remaining people, what information did he have to rule one of them out?

HAJIME: Wait. There was one thing.

Select: Truth Bullet: Snow Machines with statement: Physical Forms are Irrelevant.

HAJIME: “No, that’s wrong!”
HAJIME: “Can someone turn off the snow machines?”

IBUKI: “Ugh! I can’t! They’re too high!”

GUNDHAM: “Fuahahaha! Impudent mortals.”

HAJIME: He watched as Gundham stretched out his arm. One of his hamsters scurried up into his palm. He gave it a boost, and the hamster leapt onto one of the ceiling beams. Chittering, it scurried over to the first snow machine and pushed its nose against the button. The snow storming out slowed to a gentle flurry. The hamster hurried over to the second and then the third snow machines to do the same.

HAJIME: “Gundham used his hamsters to—”

GUNDHAM: “Are you referring to my Four Dark Devas of Destruction?”

HAJIME: “His hamsters were able to—”

GUNDHAM: “I said, are you referring to my Four Dark Devas of Destruction?”

HAJIME: “Gundham used one of his Four Dark Devas of Destruction to turn off the snow machines in the Snow Room.”

FUYUHIKO: “What’s wrong with that?”

SONIA: “Yes! Gundham was with me, so he could not have—”

HAJIME: “That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that Gundham wasn’t tall enough to reach the machines on his own.”

IBUKI: “Oh! That’s true. Even I couldn’t reach them!”

MIKAN: “B-but you’re shorter than Tanaka….”

HAJIME: “…!”

NAGITO: “Looks like you’ve got it.”

RYOTA: “Got it? Got what? What are you talking about?”

PEKO: “I believe he’s referring to the blackened.”

AKANE: “Tell us right now! Who do I have to punch?”

MONOKUMA: “Oh? Ohhhh? Did you all finally figure out who did it? Then come on come on come on! Tell me!”

MAHIRU: “Why do we have to tell you that?”

ENDIRYA: “He’s messing around. Now. Let’s see the reality you’ve chosen.”

HAJIME: That’s right. It’s…up to him. It was his responsibility to point out the blackened. Everyone was counting on him. So…he had to do it. He had to do it now.
HAJIME

TWOGAMI

RYOTA

MAHIRU

HIYOKO

MIKAN

NAGITO

PEKO

SONIA

GUNDHAM

ENDIRYA

IBUKI

KAZUICHI

AKANE

TERUTERU

FUYUHIKO

NEKOMARU

HAJIME: Like a flash light shone from deep in the back of his mind, he saw it. Was that Izuru’s doing? It seemed more like something he’d figured out only now. Izuru…he might have already known. It felt wrong though. Wrong to be relieved that it wasn’t Izuru. That it wasn’t – himself. So to speak. Part of him always hoped he was wrong when he had to accuse his friends. That wasn’t anything new. Even though being used to this was unacceptable. Even though he knew that…and yet. And yet.

HAJIME: And yet, turning back wasn’t acceptable. Looking away wasn’t acceptable. When everything was unacceptable, when all the choices before them were bad, they had to make a new one. That’s how they escaped the game. That’s how they saved their friends. But that was off the table this time. Because this wasn’t a game. Not in any sense of the word. This was an ugly reality.

HAJIME: Motive…means…opportunity. Somebody who had all three. Someone who could have taken the saw. Someone who could have left their room later to kill Nekomaru. Someone who could have fashioned the crime scene as they saw fit. Even if he didn’t understand how all of that had happened yet, it really was like Komaeda said. He could only think of one person capable of doing all of it.

Select: TWOGAMI
HAJIME: “It has to be you!”

------------------------SELECT SOMEONE END------------------------

HAJIME: “Twogami…it’s you isn’t it?”

MIKAN: “What?”

AKANE: “Tubby’s the one?”

TWOGAMI: “Interesting. What makes you suspect me?”

HAJIME: “Process of elimination. We narrowed down the list of suspects to three: you, Teruteru, and Ryota.”

TERUTERU: “I told y’all I didn’t do such a thing!”

HIYOKO: “Yeah, yeah.”

HAJIME: “But Teruteru and Ryota are both shorter than Gundham. And Gundham wasn’t tall enough to reach the snow machines. He had to use a ha—a Dark Deva to do so.”

IBUKI: “It was a cutie-patootie! I’d write a song about it!”

MONOKUMA: “Hey! I’m cuter!”

TWOGAMI: “So you think I’m tall enough to do so?”

HAJIME: “Maybe. You’re the only one of those three who could have reached it. Neither of them had an animal to help them out.”

GUNDHAM: “A familiar, you mean.”

MAHIRU: “Yeah, we’re quite familiar with you by now.”

HAJIME: “There’s also the fact that Akane and I saw you leaving the cafeteria early this morning.”

AKANE: “I remember that. He was eating chicken.”

TERTERU: “Not just any chicken. My chicken!”

AKANE: “Who cares about that?”

HAJIME: Akane…? Turning away from food? She must really be…so upset.

AKANE: “What were you really doing in there, Big Byakuya? Dammit. Trying to fool us. Get rid of evidence? Or were you celebrating after killing one of us? Did you really—do that?”

TWOGAMI: “…”

AKANE: “You better answer me right now! Or else I’ll—I’ll—”

SONIA: “Akane, please! Get a hold of yourself!”

TWOGAMI: “In other words, you don’t have a single scrap of evidence proving I did anything. All you have are a few measly deductions and a boatload of assumptions.”
HAJIME: “…Are you denying it then?”

TWOGAMI: “Denying it? Indeed I am. It would be impossible for me to kill Nekomaru in the first place.”

HAJIME: Impossible?

AKANE: “Why’s that?”

RYOTA: “Well—look at Nekomaru. He’s a body builder.”

FUYUHIKO: “A team manager.”

RYOTA: “Yeah, but he’s still way more muscular. The Imposter relies on sweets and carbs and that sort of thing.”

TERUTERU: “Hmhmhm. Not a bad thing to rely on.”

MIKAN: “B-b-but too many s-sweets are bad for—eeeek! I spoke out of turn!”

ENDIRYA: “Are you suggesting that Twogami can’t have overpowered Nekomaru?”

RYOTA: “Well…I guess so.”

AKANE: “Tch! No one could have beaten that guy in a fair fight. He’s way too strong. Look at what Gundham had to do last time. Deceitfully sneaking his pets around to push a button.”

GUNDHAM: “What did you say?”

SONIA: “Gundham, please.”

GUNDHAM: “She—she does not understand at all. Suggesting that I did not battle?! She would impugn my honor as well as Nekomaru’s?”

AKANE: “…What?”

GUNDHAM: “You foolish girl. We fought precisely because we clung to life. Only those who fight and struggle have any right to live!”

AKANE: “That’s bullshit!”

HAJIME: …Akane….

AKANE: “Right to live…fight and struggle. Even when you’re not using weird words, you don’t make sense. I don’t get it. I know I don’t get a lot of stuff. I’ve lived that way for a long time. Fighting and struggling. Getting food on the table for my siblings. Whatever happened to me didn’t matter so much then. But if you’re saying Nekomaru didn’t have a right to live…that’s stupid!”

SONIA: “Akane….”

AKANE: “He fought. He struggled. And he still died. Over and over again. You keep taking him away.”

TWOGAMI: “I didn’t—”

MONOKUMA: “Puhuhu! Yeah, the big fuddy-duddy keeps on dying. Guess no one wants him
around, huh? You could try killing Akane next.”

FUYUHIKO: “I told you to shut up!”

AKANE: “I don’t want to hear about—any rights to live or whatever. Nekomaru should be here right now. He should be laughing. Helping us. And he’s not. He’s…”

ENDIRYA: “Gone.”

AKANE: “Huh?”

ENDIRYA: “He’s gone, and the rest of you need to find out who made that happen. Well, I guess you don’t need to…”

TERUTERU: “But we do! Are you—are you saying to give up? That we should just all die?”

ENDIRYA: “I didn’t say that.”

FUYUHIKO: “Hey, Akane…are you alright now?”

AKANE: “…”

HAJIME: “Akane, listen to me. I feel the same way. Nekomaru…he encouraged me. He thought I could step up and help keep everyone safe.” It was a little like Chiaki, now that he thought about it. But thinking about it wasn’t helpful. “I guess—I haven’t done such a great job there, huh? And of course, I don’t want to be doing this either. We should still be on Jabberwock Island – no, we should still be working on finding a way to give a little back to this world. We’ve taken so much from it after all.”

MONOKUMA: “…”

ENDIRYA: “…”

AKANE: “I don’t really…get what you’re saying.”

HAJIME: “I think you do.”

AKANE: “…”

PEKO: “I believe we were discussing whether Twogami could have overpowered Nekomaru.”

IBUKI: “Could anyone?”

HAJIME: “Huh?”

IBUKI: “That guy was super strong, you know? He could probably pound rocks with his bare hands.”

HIYOKO: “That sounds like a reference.”

MAHIRU: “Peko might have been able to beat him.”

FUYHIKO: “The fuck you say?”

PEKO: “Perhaps. Regardless, I was with my young master that night. I could not risk anyone breaking into his room. Not with a motive like that in effect.”
HAJIME: “Hey, Fuyuhiko. You really did see Peko get Nekomaru and watch him head out, right?”

FUYUHIKO: “Yeah.”

HAJIME: “Okay.” In order for this trial to go anywhere, it would be best to believe Fuyuhiko. This wasn’t like before. And even before, he hadn’t been willing to sacrifice everyone else to save Peko – to admit that she had been just a tool. He’d come so far since then. Hajime would trust him.

TWOGAMI: “Is that really how pathetic your argument was?”

RYOTA: “Huh?”

TWOGAMI: “I couldn’t have beaten Nekomaru in a fight. So of course, I couldn’t have killed him. Unless I got the drop on him somehow. But as Mikan said, there weren’t any other injuries. So that never happened. Which means, I’m innocent.”

HAJIME: “…..”

TWOGAMI: “If you’re done indulging in fantasy, let’s move on to finding the culprit.”

MAHIRU: “But how? I mean – I’m not giving up. But…..”

HIYOKO: “Wasn’t this the same problem we had earlier? No one could have fought Nekomaru.”

NAGITO: “Huh? Really?”

KAZUICHI: “What do you mean, really? Weren’t you paying attention?”

RYOTA: “No one could overpower Nekomaru normally.”

GUNDHAM: “He was…strong.”

NAGITO: “Awww.”

PEKO: “Why are you sighing?”

NAGITO: “We keep saying no one could have done it. But it happened, didn’t it? We know it did. So instead of talking about how it couldn’t have happened, maybe we should talk about how it could.”

----------------NONSTOP DEBATE START------------------------

Available Truth Bullets:

Truth Bullet: Blood-Stained Wipe

Truth Bullet: Autopsy Report

Truth Bullet: Bloody Water

Truth Bullet: Hole in Ice

Truth Bullet: Missing Hand

Truth Bullet: Soaked Spare Outfit
NAGITO: “We found Nekomaru lying alone in the Snow Room. That much is a fact.”
SONIA: “That is true.”
RYOTA: “So how could that have happened? We know there wasn’t a fight.”
KAZUICHI: “Maybe a trap of some kind was used.”
HIYOKO: “Didn’t we discuss that before? There was no evidence of a trap. Nekomaru was unhurt. Apart from the whole hand thing, I mean.”
ENDIRYA: “And being dead.”
NAGITO: “None, you say?”
MAHIRU: “Maybe it really was poison after all.”
MIKAN: “But we decided his hand was cut off first. Right?”
TERUTERU: “And there weren’t any other poisons in the storage room!”
FUYUHIKO: “So, what then? Nekomaru did it to himself?”
AKANE: “No way!”
GUNDHAM: “Perhaps he was slain in a different realm entirely.”
PEKO: “That is impossible. The young mas…Fuyuhiko and I saw him leave.”
HIYOKO: “Just be the culprit already! This is impossible!”

HAJIME: It was true that they’d discussed this point before. The reason they assumed there hadn’t been a trap of some kind – that was because there weren’t other wounds on Nekomaru. But what if that wasn’t the only way a trap could have been laid? Creating a trap to incapacitate Nekomaru without hurting him – without leaving any exterior wounds. Gundham had done that before by using the Good Night button. That may not have existed here, but that didn’t mean something similar couldn’t be used. Komaeda was right. It had happened. Rather than deny that fact, they should try to make sense of it. And there was only one thing in the crime scene that could have doubled as a trap.

Select: Truth Bullet: **Hole in Ice** with statement: A Trap of Some Kind

HAJIME: “I agree with that!”

--------------------NONSTOP DEBATE END----------------------

HAJIME: “I got it. I figured out what sort of trap they used.”
KAZUICHI: “So there was a trap! I knew it!”

AKANE: “Yeah! There’s no way they coulda beat him otherwise.”

SONIA: “So what is the nature of this trap, Hajime? Could you explain it to us?”

HAJIME: “I can. The hole in the ice.”

TERUTERU: “The hole…was a trap?”

HIYOKO: “Why does your face look so creepy when you say that?”

IBUKI: “Ibuki doesn’t mind traps!”

HAJIME: “Yeah, the hole. If it wasn’t fully frozen, then—”

TWOGAMI: “It seems there is no end to your foolishness.”

------------------------REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN START------------------------

Available Truth Bullets:

Truth Bullet: Blood-Stained Wipe

Truth Bullet: Soaked Spare Outfit

Truth Bullet: Snow Machines

Truth Bullet: Saw

Truth Bullet: Missing Hand

Truth Bullet: Endirya’s Account

Truth Bullet: Peko’s Account

Truth Bullet: Autopsy Report

Truth Bullet: Bits of Ice

HAJIME: “Twogami…why do you keep challenging everything I say?”

TWOGAMI: “Am I supposed to sit back and let you lead everyone in the wrong direction? That I cannot allow. I may not be the true Ultimate Affluent Progeny, but that doesn’t mean I can risk leaving everyone in the hands of an incompetent.”

HAJIME: “Incompetent? What are you—?”

TWOGAMI: “I’m saying your arguments are guesses at best. Meaningless speculation you’re spewing out until something sticks. I admit that you’re not alone in this. I may not have seen any of these trials before, but if this is how they usually go, then it’s a miracle everyone got through any of them.”

HAJIME: “This isn’t like you. What’s going on? You told me you felt confident entrusting
everyone to me. So where is all this coming from? Did something happen?

TWOGAMI: “What happened is what I’ve seen with my own eyes. If you are determined to take this path, then I will do what I can to stop you!”

------------------------ADVANCE------------------------

TWOGAMI: “You saw the size of the hole in the ice. It was more than large enough to swallow Nekomaru. Or any of us, in fact. Earlier you said that such a thing needed to be prepared in advance.”

HAJIME: “Right.”

TWOGAMI: “But not too in advance. Because otherwise, it would have frozen over. So the timing is impeccable to this plan. And you’re saying Nekomaru just walked into it? Impossible. If a hole that big had been carved out and hadn’t frozen over, then Nekomaru would have seen it. Unless you’re changing the story again and Nekomaro’s hand wasn’t cut off first?”

HAJIME: He’d thought he had figured out what the Ultimate Imposter was up to. But now…it felt like the two of them were facing off. Why? Did the other really have so little confidence in his abilities? Or was there something else going on? Was this how Twogami was trying to protect himself and disprove the accusations? Would he really do something like that? Either way, that could wait. What mattered now was finding the flaw in the argument. Earlier, they’d said that cutting off Nekomaru’s hand came first to weaken his ability to fight back. Thinking about it now, it seemed like that argument was flawed too. Was that what Twogami was trying to point out? Or was it something else…?

HAJIME: For now though, he needed to explain why Nekomaru hadn’t seen the trap in advance. And he only had one piece of evidence to explain that.

Select: Truth Bullet: Snow Machines with statement: Nekomaru Would Have Seen It

HAJIME: “Allow me to cut through your words!”

------------------------BREAK! REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN END------------------------

HAJIME: “The reason Nekomaru didn’t see the hole was because of the snow machines!”

IBUKI: “Snow machines! Dun dun dun!”

HIYOKO: “What about the snow machines?”

HAJIME: “Remember how the room looked. When Akane, Twogami, and I broke in, they were on full blast. It was impossible to see anything.”

AKANE: “Now that you mention it, that sounds familiar. There was the smell of blood in the room, but I couldn’t see anything.”

NAGITO: “So the snow machines weren’t just a way for us to narrow down the culprit. But the culprit also used them to lure Nekomaru into a trap. A trap he couldn’t see until it was too late.”

KAZUICHI: “Why would he walk into the room at all like that though? I mean, that’s clearly suspicious.”

MIKAN: “And d-didn’t we say that his hand was removed before he went in the water?”
HAJIME: “His hand was definitely cut off before he died. But as I was thinking about it, I realized something.”

GUNDHAM: “And what is that? If you’re going to beg that much, I might as well listen.”

HAJIME: “…Fine. Yes, we agreed that Nekomaru’s hand was removed while he was alive. But what if it wasn’t removed before he went in the water? What if it happened while he was in the water?”

SONIA: “What – that would be…!”

PEKO: “I see. That would still explain how so much blood ended up in the water.”

MAHIRU: “And it would a lot easier to remove his hand that way too.”

RYOTA: “That’s true. You wouldn’t have to be stronger than him if he was flailing around in the water.”

TERUTERU: “And not just that – it would make it much easier to drown him too! I mean, he might not have been able to get out of the water with only one hand. And even if he could, it would be a lot easier to keep pushing him back in.”

AKANE: “What a coward! What a trick!”

HAJIME: “You’re right. It was a trick. Isn’t that exactly how you did, Twogami?”

TWOGAMI: “Oh? You’re still accusing me?”

HAJIME: “Figuring out how it played out doesn’t change the basic conclusions we’ve reached. You’re still the only person who could have stolen the saw, snuck out of your room at night, and reached the snow machines.”

TWOGAMI: “Is that so?”

MAHIRU: “That’s what the facts have been saying so far.”

HAJIME: “If you have any objections, feel free to say them.”

AKANE: “Well, big Byakuya? Are you going to admit it? Did you do it?”

TWOGAMI: “Of course not. This is nonsense.”

RYOTA: “Yeah! There’s no way he’d do something like this.”

SONIA: “I have to agree. It does seem difficult to believe.”

HIYOKO: “Why?”

SONIA: “Huh?”

HIYOKO: “You always say that you can’t believe one of us would kill someone, but it keeps happening anyway. How many times does it have to happen before it stops being hard to believe? Did your brain fry?”

MAHIRU: “Hiyoko!”
TERUTERU: “If he didn’t do it, he should give us an alibi, right? Or name another suspect?”

HAJIME: “That’s fine. Who else could have done it?”

TWOGAMI: “Nekomaru.”

HAJIME: Huh?

FUYUHIKO: “What?”

AKANE: “What did you say?”

ENDIRYA: “Interesting.”

MONOKUMA: “Puhuhuhu!”

TWOGAMI: “Nekomaru was certainly tall and athletic enough to reach the snow machines. Perhaps this trap was his making from the start.”

MAHIRU: “That’s ridiculous!”

RYOTA: “That could be it though. Maybe Nekomaru wanted to take action. He seemed like that type of guy.”

AKANE: “I’ll rip you in half!”

RYOTA: “Eh?”

AKANE: “You didn’t know anything about him! You never even knew him. So you wouldn’t know anything! There’s no way he would do something like that. I’m not gonna doubt the coach. I’m not gonna let anyone doubt the coach! He’s already dead. Dead, dead, dead again! What more do you want to take from him?”

HAJIME: Akane was right. “I agree with that. Nekomaru never had a chance to take the saw.”

TWOGAMI: “How can you be so sure?”

HAJIME: “Eh?”

TWOGAMI: “You said you spent some time in the lobby. Nagito and Akane went to the gym. But there was a period where the hall was unattended. Furthermore, Nekomaru was assigned to guard duty. He had ample time to go to the Snow Room then. I even have evidence.”

MIKAN: “E-evidence?”

TWOGAMI: “Yes. Evidence. The soaked spare outfit.”

SONIA: “That outfit is evidence that Nekomaru did this? How so?”

TWOGAMI: “Why would anyone else bother changing Nekomaru’s clothes? There’s no need for that, no matter how you look at it.”

TERUTERU: “Taking off his clothes? Eh?”

TWOGAMI: “But suppose Nekomaru was the one who carved the hole. And in that slippery environment, he accidentally fell in.”
AKANE: “But he didn’t die there, you tubby—”

TWOGAMI: “Shut up. I’m not finished.”

AKANE: “Ungh!”

TWOGAMI: “He climbed out, of course. But his outfit was soaked through and through. He couldn’t keep wearing it at that point. So he changed it out for one from the storage room. In other words, it was nothing more than a complete and total accident.”

MIKAN: “An accident?”

HIYOKO: “….”

TWOGAMI: “That would mean this whole thing was a setup by Nekomaru. Well? What do you say to that?”

AKANE: “How…dare…you?!”

ENDIRYA: “Why would Nekomaru want to do something like that?”

RYOTA: “The answer to that should be clear. Your motive.”

ENDIRYA: “Mine?”

MONOKUMA: “Mine!”

KAZUICHI: “I guess…it’s not impossible. Nekomaru agreed to fight Gundham in the Funhouse.”

GUNDHAM: “He did have the spirit of a warrior.”

PEKO: “Don’t tell me you’re actually believing this nonsense.”

FUYUHIKO: “I mean – it does seem unlikely. But I can’t think of any other reason for Nekomaru’s wet clothes to be hidden away in the storage room.”

HIYOKO: “And what about my clothes?”

HAJIME: Eh?

HIYOKO: “What did that lolicon thief bear want with my kimono? Why’d he slash it up?”

NAGITO: “That should be easy.”

RYOTA: “Easy? What do you mean?”

NAGITO: “We touched on it earlier. Though it would require another piece of evidence as well.”

SONIA: “Another piece?”

IBUKI: “We’re going to have a whole puzzle soon!”

NAGITO: “You understand, right, Hinata? Something else that was used in the clean-up.”

CHOOSE A TRUTH BULLET

Truth Bullet #1: Monokuma File
Truth Bullet #2: Snow Machines
Truth Bullet #3: Hole in Ice
Truth Bullet #4: Bloody Water
Truth Bullet #5: Peko’s Account
Truth Bullet #6: Autopsy Report
Truth Bullet #7: Blued Skin
Truth Bullet #8: Missing Hand
Truth Bullet #9: Missing Wristband
Truth Bullet #10: Sliding Lock
Truth Bullet #11: Bits of Ice
Truth Bullet #12: Treadmill Clock
Truth Bullet #13: Blood-Stained Wipe
Truth Bullet #14: Trash Can
Truth Bullet #15: Saw
Truth Bullet #16: Slashed Kimono
Truth Bullet #17: Soaked Spare Outfit
Truth Bullet #18: Endirya’s Testimony

HAJIME: If it was another piece of evidence that had been used in cleaning up the murder scene – or in cleaning up blood, at the very least, then there was only one logical answer.


HAJIME: “You're talking about the bloody wipe we found in the gym’s trash can, right?”

NAGITO: “Ah, how perceptive of you to remember!”

KAZUICHI: “So? What about it?”

NAGITO: “The wipe was intact. But the kimono was all slashed up. Think about what a saw looks like. It’s obvious which one was used to clean the saw and which one was used to clean off – say, a bloody hand.”

GUNDHAM: “But the one who disposed of this sanitation was the nurse, correct?”

MIKAN: “EEEK!”

HAJIME: “That’s what I can’t figure out.”
TWOGAMI: “Can’t?”

HAJIME: “Mikan never had a chance to take the saw. Nor could she have reached the snow machines. But Akane saw her in the gym.”

AKANE: “Yeah, she was there.”

KAZUICHI: “Do you remember how she looked at that time?”

AKANE: “Who do you think I am? Teru-dude?”

TERUTERU: “What’s that supposed to mean? Hmm?”

FUYUHIKO: “But if she was covered in blood, you’d notice that, right?”

AKANE: “Oh. Um. I don’t think she was bloody. That would have been a sign she’d been fighting. I definitely would have noticed that.”

HAJIME: “Mikan.”

MIKAN: “Eh?”

HAJIME: “What were you doing in there?”

MIKAN: “W-well… I didn’t want t-to say anything. It sounds so suspicious.”

HAJIME: “Mikan. It’s okay. Just tell us.”

MIKAN: “W-well, I t-ripped when I was leaving Mioda-san’s room.”

IBUKI: “That’s true. It was like WOOOH! KABOOM! SPLAT!”

KAZUICHI: “It wasn’t that bad!”

MIKAN: “And my nose started bleeding really badly, so I went back to my room and tried to plug it with one of my wipes. Heehee. It took a little while. I wanted to be sure it stopped for good though. But there weren’t any trash cans in the room, so, um, so I wanted to use the closest one.”

PEKO: “That much is true. I don’t recall having a trash can in my room.”

HAJIME: “Me neither.”

TERUTERU: “Yeah! I definitely would have used that to – well, I mean, it would have been like a bucket.”

SONIA: “So it had nothing to do with Nekomaru at all?”

MIKAN: “Y-yes, that’s right. B-but all this started happening, and t-the case seemed so close to mine. I got scared. Please don’t hate me! I’m sorry!”

HIYOKO: “Stop crying already. Jeez.”

FUYUHIKO: “I can see why you wouldn’t tell us that. It sounds pretty damn convenient.”

RYOTA: “But is it too convenient? I mean, she’s way more suspicious than Twogami.”

GUNDHAM: “What do you think, spear-haired mortal?”
Believe Mikan Tsumiki
• Don’t Believe Mikan Tsumiki

HAJIME: So it came down to whether or not he believed in Mikan. Someone who, after Komaeda, was one of the more dangerous people in this situation. Now they knew that the reason things had ended up that way was because of Junko Enoshima. Because they were the Remnants of Despair. But that had still happened, and it made trusting one another here more difficult than it should have been. But this wasn’t a new decision. Putting all of that behind them – no. Learning to live with what happened – they’d all made that choice over and over again. And they would keep doing so, no matter how many times it took.

SELECT 1: Believe Mikan Tsumiki

HAJIME: “I think Mikan’s telling the truth. She couldn’t have reached the snow machines or taken the saw. Those two facts remain.”

FUYUHIKO: “Are you sure?”

HAJIME: “Yeah, Fuyuhiko. I’m sure.”

PEKO: “Very well then. I shall trust you.”

AKANE: “That sounds good to me!”

SONIA: “Yes! Hajime has said so. He usually handles these things well.”

IBUKI: “He’s getting better at hitting the right notes! Maybe he can even be a backup singer one day!”

TERUTEREU: “I may be a better chef, but I know a detective when I see one.”

HAJIME: “I’m not a detective. Stop.”

TWOGAMI: “You’re just believing her? So easily? Without a scrap of evidence? What nonsense is this?”

FUYUHIKO: “Speaking of nonsense.”

TWOGAMI: “Hmm?”

FUYUHIKO: “What do you have to say for yourself, Twogami?”

TWOGAMI: “About what?”

PEKO: “About your involvement, of course.”

RYOTA: “What do you mean? We settled that! Nekomaru was the one who set all that up!”

HAJIME: “Even if that’s true, someone still killed him.”

RYOTA: “Ah—!”

HAJIME: “That was a clever defense you gave, Twogami. But it doesn’t change the fact that Nekomaru died. He didn’t cut off his own hand or wristband. Both went missing, after all. He
couldn’t have done that. And you didn’t find it in any rooms, did you?”

RYOTA: “Well—no.”

IBUKI: “I would have remembered seeing a severed hand! It’s so gross and creepy! It would be a great song! Something like… I Miss Saturday Nights!”

KAZUICHI: “Eh?”

TWOGAMI: “Perhaps it simply sunk in the lake.”

ENDIRYA: “Monokuma?”

HIYOKO: “Ehhh?”

AKANE: “Why are you asking him?”

MONOKUMA: “Yeah! Why are you asking me?”

ENDIRYA: “….”

MONOKUMA: “Ugh, you’re so boring. Fiiiiine. I’m pretty sure it’s not dense enough to sink.”

HAJIME: Huh? What?

IBUKI: “Hey! That’s not an answer!”

MONOKUMA: “Well too bad! That’s the best you’re getting! Use your own tiny brains.”

NAGITO: “If it didn’t sink, and it’s not in any of the rooms, then someone definitely took it. Which means, Nekomaru can’t have done it to himself.”

MAHIRU: “That puts us right back to where we are.”

AKANE: “Which means back to you, Byakuya!”

TWOGAMI: “….”

RYOTA: “Twogami? Why did you go quiet?”

TWOGAMI: “….”

RYOTA: “Come on! You have to say something. You didn’t do this, right? There’s no way you did this.”

TWOGAMI: “Humph. It seems like you’ve all made up your minds.”

MIKAN: “Made up?”

FUYUHIKO: “What else are we supposed to do?”

MAHIRU: “You haven’t given us a reason not to… vote for you.”

AKANE: “So that’s it? That’s really it? You’re gonna admit it this time?”

TWOGAMI: “If you’re so certain, then vote.”
RYOTA: “Twogami?”

HAJIME: “Didn’t you say you couldn’t let me make the wrong decision? We’re all going to die if this is wrong! Twogami, I – I’m not accusing because I want to. I don’t want it to be you. I don’t want it to be any of us. If you have something you can point to – anything that can help prove you’re not the killer – please, tell us!”

TWOGAMI: “You’re kind, aren’t you, Hajime?”

HAJIME: “Eh?”

TWOGAMI: “But a leader needs to be more than kind. A leader needs to be strong. To be able to push forward and keep everyone organized. Keep everyone together. No matter how unpleasant the reality you’re facing is, a good leader must face it nonetheless. Face it and overcome it.”

ENDIRYA: “Very well said. Are we to take this moralizing speech as a confession?”

RYOTA: “No! That’s not what he means! Right?”

TWOGAMI: “....”

RYOTA: “Right???”

TWOGAMI: “Monokuma, go ahead and start the vote.”

MONOKUMA: “Okie-dokie!”

RYOTA: “No! Don’t!”

HAJIME: “Hang on—!”

MONOKUMA: “Now then, please look at the panel in your podiums. We’ve finally gotten there! At last, the heart-racing excitement as the blackened and the spotless finally face off! Will you make the right choice? Or the dreadfully wrong one? It’s…VOTING TIME!”

------------------------SELECT SOMEONE------------------------

HAJIME
TWOGAMI
RYOTA
MAHIRU
HIYOKO
MIKAN
NAGITO
PEKO
SONIA
GUNDHAM
ENDIRYA
IBUKI
KAZUICHI
AKANE
TERUTERU
FUYUHIKO
NEKOMARU

SELECT: TWOGAMI

VOTE COUNT:
HAJIME: 0
TWOGAMI: 15
RYOTA: 1
MAHIRU: 0
HIYOKO: 0
MIKAN: 0
NAGITO: 0
PEKO: 0
SONIA: 0
GUNDHAM: 0
ENDIRYA: 0
IBUKI: 0
KAZUICHI: 0
AKANE: 0
TERUTERU: 0
FUYUHIKO: 0
NEKOMARU: 0
VERDICT: CORRECT. TWOGAMI HAS BEEN FOUND GUILTY.

ALL RISE. CLASS TRIAL – END.
VERDICT: CORRECT. TWOGAMI HAS BEEN FOUND GUILTY.

ALL RISE. CLASS TRIAL – END.

Seeing the name displayed on the monitor felt like the punchline to a bad joke. Or perhaps it just felt like a punch. Hajime’s stomach ached, and not just because his bladder demanded relief. That fact certainly didn’t help. His muscles were tight and cramped, and he could barely stand, let alone walk. His lower half felt heavy, as if it had been constructed out of metal. Like Komaeda’s hand. Like Nekomaru’s body had once been.

And yet, disregarding that fact had never been easier.

“You bastards cast your votes!” Monokuma chuckled. “Kind of a shame that the big fatso admitted to it ahead of time though. Can’t really keep you in suspense now. You just had to ruin the fun, didn’t you, you big lump?”

Twogami had his arms folded across his chest. He glared in the opposite direction from where Monokuma stood, saying nothing.

“So that’s really it?” Akane stepped away from her podium. “It’s really done now? It’s really you?”

“Akane, you must not!” Sonia called. “Because…we do not even know why. We do not understand. Twogami, will you please explain it to us?”

“There’s no way…. Ryota had collapsed by his podium. Hajime couldn’t see his face because his head was down, but the other boy’s shoulders were shaking violently. “He didn’t….he wouldn’t.”

“He didn’t? He wouldn’t?” Monokuma cackled. “He already admitted it. Which means—you just can’t accept it. Why are humans always so slow to accept unpleasant realities? The sooner you accept it, the sooner you can deal with it, you know?”

“…..” Twogami continued holding his silence.

“Indeed. There is no need for speech.” Gundham purred, loosely gripping one end of his scarf. “The cries of the vanquished slip silently into the night.”

“Shut up!” Akane growled. “There’s every need for speech. He better start talking right now! Otherwise I’ll punch him!”

“That’s your answer to everything, isn’t it?” Ryota shouted. He had lifted his head and glared at Akane. Whereas Twogami’s expression tilted toward the cooler side, Ryota’s burned with white-hot venom. “Just punch the problem until it goes away. That never works!”

“What would you know about it, huh?” Akane shot back. “Didn’t you just run away before? How’d that work out?”

Ryota got to his feet, fists clenched.
Peko not-so-subtly walked in between them. “Enough.” She declared flatly. “Twogami, do you really intend to say nothing?”

He gazed at her, eyes unreadable behind his glasses. “What would you have me say?”

“It’s tooooootally weird, isn’t it?” Ibuki said. “Remember when Teruteru tried to splash sploosh stab Komaeda-chan under the floorboards?”

“Wh-why are you bringin’ that up now?” The chef demanded, gripping his hat tightly in both hands. “Those times are behind us! Well and done, like an overcooked steak! Nobody in their right mind would eat such a thing. It’s barbaric!”

“But Nanami-chan totally said it then!” Ibuki answered. “Twogami was trying to protect Komaeda because he wanted no one to die. He even promised he wouldn’t let anyone die. It was pretty cool, you know? I think it’s really difficult to keep a promise all the way to the end. Awww. I guess he couldn’t do it after all.”

“My promise was to guide you all as your leader.” Twogami replied flatly. “I am no longer your leader. Thus that responsibility does not fall to me. Rather, it lands in Hajime’s lap.”

“Mine?” Hajime blurted out without thinking. Obviously it landed in his lap. He understood that much. “Are you saying that because you weren’t the leader anymore, you felt free to kill someone?” That couldn’t be what he meant.

“I did what had to be done for everyone.” Twogami said. “That’s all there is to it.”

“Could you be referring to the motive?” Nagito asked.

“Oh, yeah!” Kazuichi exclaimed. “Speaking of which – where are the bathrooms? Not that I’m trying to cut this short or anything, heh.”

“Upstairs.” Endirya folded one gloved hand over a non-gloved one. “You’ll be taken there once things here are finished.”

“Yeah!” Monokuma agreed. “I’m sure everyone’s been looking forward to that.”

“That motive was nonsense anyway.” Mahiru jabbed her finer in the bear’s direction. “Endangering everyone like that – it’s the same thing as forcing them!”

“Hmmm?” Monokuma tilted his head, one paw by his mouth. “What’s wrong with that? You’re all being forced to play this game, aren’t you? It’s poetic justice! What goes around comes around.”

“Ehhh? But it’s only happening to us,” Hiyoko said.

“The motive was indeed a primary concern. I suppose anyone could have figured that out.” Twogami uncrossed his arms. Even a gesture as simple as that seemed to increase the space he occupied.

“I—I understand that, but….” Sonia’s voice hitched. She rubbed her wrist over her eyes. “We had a plan. We were going to – we were not going to wait around to die.” She turned slightly toward Gundham as she said that. “You did not need to act so recklessly.”

“It was a reckless plan indeed.” Twogami agreed smoothly. He adjusted his glasses, pushing them up his nose.
“So you really did it.” Whatever fire burned in Ryota extinguished itself with that statement. He slumped back to the ground. “To save everyone else…."

“Oi.” Akane took another step forward.

Peko’s hand drifted back toward where she used to keep the bamboo sword. Not finding it, she lowered it back to her side.

Akane either didn’t see this or chose to ignore it. “Tell me. Did Nekomaru…really do that? Are you really saying he set it all up – and ended up in his own trap?”

Twogami gazed at her neutrally. “Is it really so unbelievable?”

“Hell yeah it is!” Akane shot back.

The imposter raised an eyebrow. “Then don’t believe it. It’s all the same to me.”

“…Why?” Hajime asked.

“Why what? I believe we went over my motive.” Twogami picked up his blue tie, threading it between two meaty fingers. “Everyone was going to die if no one did something. Even if it wasn’t immediate.” He held up his wrist, prominently displaying the small silver band. “It was only a matter of time until someone triggered this.”

“But we have three strikes on that.” Kazuichi responded, scratching the back of his head. “No one would trigger their own action three times.”

“E-even someone as clumsy as me wouldn’t do that.” Mikan agreed.

“Perhaps you’re right.” A faint smirk, more suited to Togami than Twogami, crept over his lips. “I don’t need to baby the rest of you anymore.”

“Any more? Tch.” Fuyuhiko scowled. “None of us ever needed that in the first place. But killing someone to save the group – I guess I can sort of understand something like that. Better than I used to, anyway.”

There was a flash of movement from Peko’s direction, but when Hajime looked closer, he didn’t see anything. Perhaps he had imagined it.

“I don’t understand.” Mahiru said. “If that was really your motive, why didn’t you come forward and admit it during the trial?”

The Imposter gazed directly at Hajime. “Tell them, Hajime.”

“Huh?” Hajime responded intelligently. The response stemmed more from surprise than ignorance. He had a fairly good idea why the other hadn’t simply confessed at the start. “I think it was some kind of test.”

“A test?” Teruteru echoed. “Wh-what does that even mean? You were going to let us all die for a test?”

“I had no intention of letting anyone die.” Twogami said flatly. “Rest assured of that.”

“Yeah…you say that.” Kazuichi tugged down one side of his beanie. “But I mean, how are we supposed to trust you now, you know?”
“I guess this was my first class trial.” Twogami didn’t look at Kazuichi. It wasn’t entirely clear whether he was even responding to that question or not. “Certainly, I had to see what it was like. With my own eyes.”

“That’s it?” Hiyoko tilted her head, a dangerous look swirling in her eyes. “That’s why we had to go through all that again?”

Twogami snorted. “Of course, I had to see how well you all handled it. I know you’ve made it through other trials in the simulation. I was not so fortunate. Therefore, I had to be sure you could handle yourselves. I was prepared to come forward if that was the only way.”

“I see.” Komaeda mused. “Ah, you wanted to see them shine too, didn’t you?”

“Don’t you start.” Akane growled. “No one’s in the mood for that crap.”

“I suppose you all passed. Barely.” Twogami grunted.

“Passed?” Mahiru jabbed a finger at him. “I can’t believe this. You were just testing us? That’s not right.”

“I grow weary of repeating myself.” Rather than coming out, Twogami seemed to be sinking further and further into his Ultimate Affluent Progeny persona. “Everyone was going to die if I did nothing. That was the motive. A rather cheap one, at that.” He added, pushing his glasses back and shooting a glare in Monokuma’s direction.

The bear shrugged. “Eh, maybe it was a little forced. What’s wrong with that? It got the fun started, didn’t it?”

“Fun?” Mikan protested.

Twogami turned back to the group. “Given that everyone was going to die anyway, I took action.”

“You could have waited.” Hajime said. “We were working on a plan…we all agreed to hold off. Did you forget about that?”

The lines around Twogami’s face seemed to soften slightly as he eyed Hajime. “I did not.” He said quietly. “But trading in that kind of idealism can be dangerous. For example, you set up everyone for betrayal.”

“I—what?” Hajime sputtered. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that agreement created an environment where people lowered their guards.” Twogami retorted. “That’s why your sentry idea was a good one. Trust and betrayal, truth and lies – those are things we must remain vigilant toward.”

“But—”
“Besides,” Twogami cut through the interruption with ease. “Not everyone could accept such an agreement. Not even from you. Especially if what our captors say is true and we have a traitor among us. That seems to be a regular feature in Monokuma’s games by now.”

“Hey!” Monokuma threw up his paws. “Are you saying I’m getting stale and repetitive? I won’t let that stand. I am Monokuma! The killing games are my specialty!”

“Oi.” Akane spoke up, looking torn between being confused and upset. It was a look that wasn’t uncommon for her, and yet, Hajime couldn’t help feeling that she’d been through that far too often. “Are you saying…Nekomaru didn’t agree with that either? Are you saying he lied to us?”

“As I said.” Twogami transferred his glare to her. “Be vigilant.”

“There’s no way he would do that!” Akane insisted.

“You keep saying that.” Kazuichi interjected. “But I mean – it’s not like Twogami has a reason to lie now. He’s…he’s going to die, you know?”

"The fuck?" Fuyuhiko jabbed a finger in his direction. "Weren't you the one who just said we can't trust anything he says?"

"I - I don't know what I believe." Kazuichi's eyes retreated beneath his beanie.

"Because he acted to keep everyone safe.” Ibuki nodded sagely. “I understand that. Ah, I wish there’d been an easier way for him to keep that promise now. I’m not sure this really counts.”

"The reason I didn’t come forward was different.” Twogami said. “That happened – I suppose you could say from my own curiosity. Given my past – and I mean my past even before becoming a Remnant of Despair – I’ve always had a hard time opening up to others. Being distrustful, being distrusted – they were two sides of the same coin.”

Kazuichi brought one hand up to his beanie but said nothing. Nor was he the only one to react. Hiyoko shifted, brushing down one side of her kimono. Fuyuhiko tugged at his collar. Even Mikan fiddled with the bandages wrapped around one of her wrists.

"Things are likely to get worse,” Twogami continued, “at least for those of you who’ll be carrying on here. You might end up with a culprit who won’t come forward if you get it wrong. So I had to be sure you were capable of finding the truth. As I said. You passed—barely.”

"You can’t,” Ryota gasped, latching onto Twogami’s arm. “I can’t—this—you can’t!”

"Ryota.” Twogami placed a meaty hand on the smaller boy’s shoulder. “I’m particularly worried about you.”

"Me?” The young animator repeated.

Twogami nodded. He had his head lowered, so Hajime couldn’t quite make out his expression. But the pride – even arrogance – seemed to have seeped out of his tone. “You’re getting very emotional about all of this. I know you’re in the same boat as me – you haven’t experienced any of these so-called trials for yourself. I guess we’re outliers in that respect. Nonetheless, you’re going to need to be a lot stronger than that if you want to make it through this.”

Ryota glanced down. What he was thinking, Hajime had no idea.

“The emotional bit applies to many of you,” Twogami said in a louder voice, staring directly at
“Guh!” Akane glared back. “You don’t get to tell me that. My feelings about Coach Nidai – that’s not something you can take away. No matter what you say.”

“Humph. Is that so?” A faint smile flitted across the imposter’s face as he closed his eyes. “That’s good then.”

“I understand all of that,” Teruteru murmured, stroking his chin. His little white chef’s hat deflated, slowly sinking down toward his head. “But why did you choose Nekomaru? He’s a big, strong guy. He killed that cow for our party back on the island.”

“M-maybe Nekomaru really did start the trap then,” Mikan said.

“But Twogami told us not to believe that,” Teruteru replied.

“I said no such thing.” Twogami had a look on his face that said he was barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Hajime knew that feeling well. “I said believe what you will. It makes no difference to me.”

“He was a walking mass of muscles,” Hiyoko snickered. “But that doesn’t mean you can just kill him. It doesn’t really matter what your reasons are. You still killed him. Besides, we heard that motive before.”

“Huh?” Ibuki asked.

“Yeah. Remember the pervy chef?” Hiyoko pointed at Teruteru, just in case her words had left behind any doubt. “He said he was just trying to protect everyone from the hope dope over there, but really, he wanted to see his mom.”

“Wha – what’s your point?” Teruteru demanded.

“He’s probably just lying too.” Hiyoko said, a dark look settling across her face. “No one who really wanted to save everyone would risk picking a fight with Nekomaru. Not even Akane could ever beat him, and she’s all brawn and no brains.”

Akane nested one hand on her hip and glanced away but otherwise ignored the slight.

“You can think what you like.” Twogami replied. “Whatever happens in your head doesn’t concern me.”

“If you tell us that, how are we supposed to accept it?” Sonia asked, nervously fiddling with her hair. “I want to believe that you were trying to save everyone. That our time together meant something and you were not just using us to escape. And yet….”

“It’s ironic, isn’t it?” Twogami smirked. “You all had to have faith in each other to solve this case. Yet all you can do now is choose whether or not to have faith in me.”

Silence followed his statement as the words hesitantly slipped into everyone’s consciousness. What could Hajime say to something like that? It was true – he’d made a conscious choice in the trial to believe Mikan. And they’d lucked out that so many people had been pairing off and giving one another alibis. Without that, this case could have gone in any number of directions. If the imposter had told the truth, he’d have come forward anyway. But the next person might not.

The next person…already he’d assumed someone else would kill. As much as it sucked to think
that, as nice as it would be to imagine everyone would stick together – this was the reality of their situation. Even after the first killing game they’d gone through together, someone had killed again.

Endiryua coughed. “Does anyone else have something to say?"

“I hope not.” Monokuma shrugged. “These farewells always go on forever. It gets kind of boring.”

“Just think of it as another part of the game.” Twogami retorted. “There will always be something you can’t control – some variable you can’t account for.” The smirk so characteristic of the rich progeny had yet to depart from his lips. “Isn’t that infuriating?”

“Stop it.” Ryota spoke without a single tremor in his voice. No hint of hesitation whatsoever. Hajime found himself staring at the small animator.

“…Stop what?” Even from this distance, the light blue of Twogami’s eyes could clearly be seen as they latched onto Ryota Mitarai.

“Stop acting like him.” The same unwavering steel laced Ryota’s tone. “Stop hiding behind him. Just for now… just at the end.”

Despite the fact that they’d been fighting just a few moments earlier, Akane managed a stiff nod. “I agree. If you’re not going to be honest with us – if you’re not going to tell us what really happened with the coach – then at least be honest with yourself.”

Another beat of silence followed their words.

Twogami lifted a hand, gripping the nosepiece of his glasses. His fingers tightened around it for a second. Then two. Then he lifted the glasses, pulling them off his face and lowering them down to his side and tucking them into his suit pocket.

“Honesty.” He chuckled, a low and deep sound. “What a word that is. A lifetime of distrust and skepticism and paranoia and despair, and you say I could just be honest now?”

“Why not?” Hajime chimed in. The memory of him, Komaeda, and Twogami talking together in a cottage flashes through his mind. “You’ve done it before.”

“I admit, something about you does inspire honesty.” Twogami replied. “Yet it doesn’t work that way at all. I’m afraid it’s not that easy. It’s not so much that lying is another way of telling the truth. But when you’ve been doing both for so long – when you become a lie, that’s what remains.”

“To a person, there’s little difference between a truth and a lie everyone believes.” Endiryua commented. “Frankly, a truth is what I was hoping to see here. I suppose it’s still early.”

A truth…? Those words hit a snag in Hajime’s brain. What truth? Or which truth?

“Ryota.” Twogami placed a hand on his shoulder again. A moment later, that small gesture blossomed into a full-blown hug. It happened so quickly that telling which of them initiated it was impossible. In fact, with Twogami’s bulk overshadowing Ryota, even telling the two men apart proved challenging. For someone who’d just criticized for Ryota for being too emotional, it seemed strange.

Hajime grit his teeth. This damned killing game. Akane and Nekomaru weren’t the only victims here.

“Take care of yourself.” Twogami whispered before straightening up again. He returned his hands
to his sides, glancing coolly at Enderlya and Monokuma. “Go ahead then. Enjoy winning this battle. You won’t win the war.”

“Ah, how courageous!” Komaeda stepped closer to the imposter. “What a shining example you are.”

“Shut up.” Akane glowered. “Or I’ll punch ya.”

“Kids these days are so violent.” Monokuma cackled. “Or perhaps you Despairlings were always like that.”

“Despairlings?” Hiyoko made a face. “Gross.”

Monokuma shrugged. “Well something had to attract you to Junko. And I gotta tell you, loli jailbait, it ain’t your good looks!”

“Wha—!” Hiyoko’s jaw dropped. “I’m not a loli anymore! Fuyuhiko’s the chibi one!”

“The fuck?” Fuyuhiko growled.


“It’s fine.” Twogami closed his eyes. “As long as all of you are able to act like usual – that’s fine.”

“Twogami….” Tears slipped down Sonia’s cheeks. Gundham moved to her side.

“No need to worry.” Ibuki peered through two fingers at him. “I’m never going to change. Except for the new trendy phrases I make. Those are going to change a lot!”

“Yeah.” Kazuichi agreed. “I can’t really see Ibuki doing anything else.”

“She could make music we could actually listen to,” Fuyuhiko said.

Ibuki shook her head. “Nope!”

“Worth a try.” Peko said blankly. So blankly that it was impossible to tell whether or not she was joking. Her stony face gave nothing away either.

It was cheap optimism. Hajime knew that. The same kind of yen-store optimism they’d clung to after other trials. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn’t. Sometimes they forced it too. Either way, if what the Imposter really wanted in the end was to see everyone acting as they always had, acting totally normal – or as normal as this odd group got, anyway – then what else could they do?


Without warning, Akane lunged for the bear.

Before she made it more than a few steps, Gundham caught her arm and pulled her back. His disrupted scarf dangled down by his chest, and Hajime spotted one of his hamsters poking its button nose out of his inner coat pocket.

“Let me go!” Akane hissed.

“Do not pick a battle with such a foe,” Gundham told her. “Nekomaru understood the foolishness of such an action. You would do well to follow his example.”
“…What?” Akane asked. “Are you saying I’m still not strong enough?”

Hajime walked over to the pair. Akane often had difficulty picking up on things. There seemed to be very little that could hold her interest for long. Other than fighting and training, anyway. But he had to try to get through to her. Losing Nekomaru over and over again. What would he do if that was Chiaki? Or someone else important to him?

He glanced back at the others, and his gaze landed on Komaeda. The white-haired luckster wasn’t looking at him though. Hajime turned back to Akane. “Look,” he said, thinking fast. “Do you remember that pillar in the Funhouse? The one we couldn’t lift.”

Akane sniffed. “Man, that was heavy.”

“Right.” For some reason, the urge to laugh crept over Hajime. He shrugged it off. “Trying to fight Monokuma is like lifting a dozen of those pillars. You need more than just strength to do it.”

“…” Akane glanced at him. Her brown eyes didn’t display any of the usual nonchalant confusion she so frequently exhibited. She gave a low grunt in response, but her shoulders relaxed enough that Gundham let go of her. She stood in place, staring at no one in particular.

“There are many questions lingering around this case.” Twogami said when the quiet had reigned for a time. “What you choose to believe or not believe – either way, I’m sure you’ll be able to find the truth behind it all.” In that praise, there wasn’t as much as a shadow of Byakuya Togami.

“The truth….?” Hajime repeated. “Are you saying – we haven’t found it?”

“Monokuma.” Twogami ignored this entirely. “It’s time.”

“Finally!” Monokuma leapt up. “Ah, boy, I’ve been cooking up an execution for a while. Especially for an imposter like you. Puhuhu. We’ll strip away everything you have until only despair remains! That should be familiar for you, right?”

“I will not despair.” Twogami smiled. “That’s behind us now.”

“We’ll see.” The bear flashed a big toothy grin. “Now then. For Byakuya Twogami, who-gives-a-crap-what-his-real-name-is – I’ve prepared a very special punishment!”

“Amazing.” Komaeda whispered, paying no attention to Monokuma. Another step brought him right up to the Ultimate Imposter. “Amazing! How strong you must be, remaining hopeful even in this—”

A ringing smack echoed through the narrow confines of the trial room. For a moment, Hajime thought Akane had flown off the handle again. But she was still standing right beside him. The only people who moved were Komaeda, who was stumbling back and falling onto his rear end. His mechanical hand cupped his cheek, though with his back toward Hajime, he couldn’t see the other’s expression.

The other person moving was Twogami, whose hand still hung in the air from the slap.

There were a few gasps, most notably from Mahiru and Sonia. But for a moment, no one moved. Then a strange chiming sound filled the air. Coming from Twogami’s direction.

“…eh?” Hajime lifted his head, staring out. “What’s—?”

Twogami glanced down at his wrist. For a moment, his sleeve slipped back, and a flashing light
could be seen from the band around his wrist.

No. No. It couldn’t be.

“E-eh?” Sonia blanched, covering her mouth. “Is – is that…?”

“Ah…I forgot.” Twogami lowered his arm again. He sighed, craning his neck back and looking up toward the ceiling. “How foolish of me.”

“Uh—” Ryota didn’t even finish the thought before grabbing his friend. “No, no, it can’t be!”

Mikan ran forward a second later. “Eh? Eh! Let me see! Move! Maybe I can—!”

“No, you move!” Monokuma screeched. “He’s not dying before his punishment time! No way!”

Beneath the lighthearted cream-color of the suit, Hajime spotted a rapidly growing darkness. Like an ink blot on a napkin, it expanded relentlessly, corrupting the color. It unfolded in both slow and fast motion all at once. His mind wanted to reject this reality. To refuse to believe it, like Teruteru was repeatedly muttering in the background. But he knew he couldn’t do that.

Twogami swayed and stumbled. Both Ryota and Mikan had grabbed him, but neither was strong enough to do more than slow his fall. He ended up pulling both of them down with him.

Komaeda rolled over to avoid being squashed by the trio, but he remained on the ground. His gesture actually tripped up Monokuma, who’d been waddling over to get the wristband.

“Watch it!” The black-and-white bear snarled, jumping back up in a flash.

Hajime moved, and as he did, the others leapt into action as well. Within a handful of seconds, everyone had gathered around the four fallen people. The skin around Twogami’s neck and face was already contorting. Wrinkles sprouted as the skin purpled. Traces of blood leaked out of his lips. It was…Hajime recognized it almost immediately. Even though she hadn’t died that way, an image of Chisa Yukizome lit up in his mind. What she and former the former chairman had set up together in the Future Foundation…the killing game the Remnants themselves had taken credit for. They’d told the whole world that they were its enemies. Ironic that that course of action was all they could do as repentance.

As Ryota shouted, Twogami, using his other arm, grabbed Ryota and pulled him close. Hajime couldn’t see what was happening, but it seemed like Twogami was whispering something. Despite how close everyone stood, no one else seemed to hear.

“Move it, tiny!” Monokuma thrust Ryota aside. The boy cried out as he fell on top of Mikan, who herself let out a startled squeal.

Monokuma gripped Twogami’s arm to unlock the wristband. “You don’t get to die before you get executed,” he growled. “I put a lot of work into that. You hear me?”

Twogami’s hand hung limply in the bear’s claws. His neck rolled back, tilting his head toward the sky. Without his glasses, his face looked younger, softer somehow. His clear, blue eyes stared directly at Hajime. Neither spoke, but in that moment, everyone else seemed to fade away. The students gathered around the dying person. Endirya and Monokuma. Everyone, save for them.

Then Twogami closed his eyes.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Ryota’s scream shredded the illusion. The others were
back, standing in the same places. Twogami lay sprawled on his back, skin blued out and bleeding. He looked like – he looked like Nekomaru. Even the floor around him was white, save for the bloodstains seeping against the tile.

Even over Ryota’s sobbing, the sound of the disconnected wristband hitting the floor rang through the room.

“N-no way!” Mahiru gasped. Her words opened the floodgates.

“It can’t be!”

“How could this happen?”

“Twogami? Twogami?!”

“Open your eyes, man!”

“Come on, wake up.”

Here they were. The survivors. Gathered around the body of another killer, trying to bring him back to life. It would have been comical if it weren’t so unbelievable. That overwhelming body, once brimming with life, now lay still on the floor. The voice that once carried such authority and gravity had fallen silent. It wasn’t a reality Hajime felt prepared to accept. It never was.

Komaeda had gotten to his knees next to the body. He reached out with his mechanical hand, gently laying it against Twogami’s neck. “Ah,” he murmured softly. “It looks like you were too late, Monokuma.”

“Too late?” The bear was nearly vibrating with fury. “What do you mean, too late?”

Mikan sniffed, rubbing her eyes with her fingers. “He’s – he’s – he’s!”

Sonia wiped her eyes with slender fingers. “It can’t be…no.”

“He’s not!” Ryota insisted, draping his arms over Twogami’s chest. “He’s—not!” His head fell over his arms, and his hair slipped down, concealing his face. His shoulders shook.

“Pray for his soul.” Gundham purred. “That it may accompany Nekomaru’s to Nirvana.”

“He’s not going anywhere with the coach.” Akane shot back. “Dammit! Things shouldn’t have – why did things turn out like this?”


“Heh. Classic Mr. Ham Hands.” Hiyoko pointed at Monokuma. “He got away from you.”

“What did you say?” Monokuma asked. His voice was low, sharp.

“Th-that’s right.” Teruteru realized, beady eyes widening. “You don’t get to execute him. He went out his own way. He won!”

He—won? That was one way to think about it. Hajime couldn’t tear his gaze away from the body. Nekomaru hadn’t won. But Twogami—had he done that deliberately? All to prevent Monokuma from executing him? Was that really it? The class trial had ended, but it didn’t take most of the questions with it. Those remained, swirling through the air like all the snow back in the Snow
Monokuma doubled over laughing. “He won? He won? Bwahaha! What nonsense are you talking about? He’s dead. Dead is dead. People die when they’re killed.”

“No, Hiyoko’s right.” Mahiru said. She was one of the only people remaining completely upright, remaining unbowed and unbroken by the despair soaring around them. “He was forceful, all the way to the end. It was the same way when he wanted to be our leader on the island too. He always had to do things his way. It’s not any different now.”

The light falling from above streamed down over Mahiru’s red hair as she glared over at Monokuma. “That’s why he’s beaten you now. By going out his own way.” In a flash, her gaze turned on the other students. “And he wouldn’t want the rest of us to stand here crying over him.” Her hand clenched into a fist near her chest. That was a common gesture of his strength, but for a moment, it looked to Hajime like it had been trembling so badly that she’d clenched it in order to hide that. “We can’t give in here,” Mahiru continued.

Mahiru….

“I don’t think – I still don’t think – killing can ever be justified.” Mahiru said. Her voice shook, faltered. Regained its footing, so to speak. “So I can’t – I mean, even if I understand – I can’t condone what happened. I would have preferred we find another way out of that. I mean… I’ve already… I’ve already aided a killer before.” She took a deep breath. “I guess it’s not that easy anymore, huh? Twogami understood that. And if what he said is true, then so did Nekomaru. All we can do is try to understand that too.”

No one spoke in the immediate seconds following her speech. It had probably been intended to help everyone feel better. To the extent that any words could lighten the despair of having your friends die. No, not just die. Kill each other. But for Hajime, all he felt was a tightening in his stomach and chest. As if Izuru had migrated down there and was trying to crush him from the inside.

A chime echoed through the room, and the elevator doors opened.

“So what if he won?” Monokuma sneered. “You all can make your pretty speeches and trade in your 100-yen clichés. It doesn’t change anything. You’re all still going to be stuck here, killing until you die!”

“…Go ahead.” Endirya swept his hand toward the elevator. “The next floor has opened up.”

What was left for any of them to do but go? There wasn’t anything they could say about Twogami or Nekomaru now. Not after what Mahiru had said. The young photographer’s words didn’t change much, nor did they lift the despair around them. But nobody could say that. Nobody could break them. Breaking them meant going back.

“Uh….” Kazuichi glanced down at the body before hurriedly averting his gaze. “And, the, um… er….”

“Yes, there are bathrooms too.” Endirya said.

“Thank God!” Kazuichi rushed into the lift. Sure, he had to go, but it seemed to Hajime that he moved really quickly.

“I—excuse me.” Sonia staggered after Kazuichi. That seemed to open the floodgates, and most of the class filed in, suddenly reminded of their aching bowels and desperate need to relieve
themselves.

It seemed like something…Nekomaru would have appreciated.

Everyone had gotten into the lift except for Komaeda, Ryota, Endirya, and himself. Even Monokuma had disappeared somewhere. Hajime didn’t care. He felt himself moving a second before he realized he was walking. His hand lifted, nearly of its own accord, but stopped before reaching Ryota. His fingers twitched, writhed, and curled inward.

“Ryota.” Hajime had to pause and swallow to clear whatever had slipped into his throat before he could speak further. “Ryota. Come on.”

He wasn’t sure what he’d expected in response. Resistance, maybe. Ryota to shout at him, push him back, demand to be left alone. Something like that.

What he did not expect was Ryota to quietly stand up and turn toward him. The other boy’s eyes were red, but tears no longer dripped down his cheeks. He stared at Hajime – no, Hajime realized that was not an accurate description. He stared through Hajime.

“…Ryota?” He repeated.

The male shook his head and shuffled toward the elevator.

That was not good. Hajime hesitated, glancing back at Twogami’s corpse. From this angle, the blue, distorted half of his face wasn’t visible. So the blond hair, the cream suit, the girth – all of it looked almost normal. That was something he’d thought many times before. It never worked out that way. How was he supposed to feel about any of this, other than the sadness of having lost two friends?

But there wasn’t anything he could think to say here. Not with Endirya watching and Monokuma around somewhere.

“Hajime? Are you coming?” Sonia asked.

“Yeah, hurry up!” Kazuichi whined.

“…Right.” Hajime moved into the elevator after Ryota. Lost. That was it. He’d slowly been getting over this feeling of being lost. In the simulation. As a Remnant—as Izuru. On the island. After all that progress, this felt like the biggest backslide so far. Now he understood why his chest had tightened up when Mahiru spoke. “Let’s…go….”

Somebody pushed the button for the elevator to ascend. Hajime didn’t see who. His eyes had drifted back to the body. They remained there as the doors began sliding closed. Surely Twogami would take a breath. That big chest would rise, those glasses would flash, that voice would speak – whether arrogantly or not, it didn’t really even matter. Just that it spoke at all. That anything happened.

The doors closed, and nothing did.

……………………………………………………
“Are you not going?” Kenyano asked as the lift pulled away from them.

“Me?” Nagito smiled. “Ah, I’m sure the rest of them wouldn’t want to be around someone like me anyway.” Letting go of the Ultimate Imposter’s arm, he wobbled his way to his feet. “I’ll make my way up after they’ve gotten settled. It’ll be easier that way.”

He noted the way Kenyano’s violet eyes narrowed.

“Is something troubling you?” Nagito tilted his head to the side. “Is it my presence? Ah, no matter where I go….”

“Don’t oversell it.” Kenyano moved closer in a roundabout path, crossing behind several of the podiums to approach Nagito and the body still sprawled out on the floor. “Your performance in the simulation was far better than what you showed us in this trial.”

“Is that a compliment?” Nagito asked.

Kenyano’s frown didn’t as much as twitch. “There are several remaining holes in this case that you never brought up. Am I supposed to expect you didn’t notice any of them? And spare me whatever self-pitying reply you’re about to give.”

“What sort of holes do you mean?” Nagito asked, wide-eyed.

“Sawing off the hand, for example.” Kenyano retorted. “It’s a saw. Not a sword. If it was used in the manner described in the trial, there’s no way they could have cut off his hand. If Nekomaru truly was in the water and they wanted to saw off his hand to weaken his struggles, they would have to hold his hand down and saw it off. A single swing wouldn’t do it. And if they were doing that, there’s no reason Nekomaru couldn’t have – say – grabbed them and pulled them into the water.”

“That’s an astute observation!” Nagito gushed. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less from one such as yourself. Though it does seem strange to me. If you were aware of that, why didn’t you bring it up in the trial?”

Kenyano’s eyebrows knitted together before relaxing again. “I’m an observer.”

“Hmmmm. You must take your role seriously then.” Nagito glanced around the empty room.

“He’s not watching.” Kenyano said.

Nagito smirked. “That’s a big statement of trust. You must have really put a lot into this whole recreation.”

“….?” Kenyano sighed.

“If you’re really just an observer,” Nagito said thoughtfully, “then I imagine you won’t get actively involved. That would – defeat the point, wouldn’t it?”

“Wouldn’t what you’re doing?” Kenyano fired back.

Nagito smiled again. “Only if it’s the same point. From what I’ve seen – I don’t think it is. Do you, Kenyano-kun?”

A sharp intake of breath briefly became the sole sound in the room. “That’s closer to what I
expected.” Lily-white hands slid into the pockets of that deep black coat. Endirya’s black boots neatly clipped together at a neat, ninety-degree angle. “You really are dangerous.”

“Someone like me?”

Kenyano’s eyes flared. “Especially someone like you.”

How much or how little was really known reminded Nagito of the verbal spars he’d had with Kamukura. Or Hinata. Usually Kamukura though. It wasn’t so much that he enjoyed them. Or perhaps part of him did. But they weren’t necessary with someone like Hinata. He was so open, so…but here, it was a different game.

Nagito gazed back at Kenyano, pale gray eyes lighting up fervently. “Well – I guess that makes me lucky.”

Kenyano’s head drifted back and forth in a slow, almost uncertain shake. Though it could have meant something else. Nagito wasn’t entirely sure. “I’ll take care of this then,” Kenyano said, indicating Twogami.

“I hope you will.” Nagito agreed amicably. “I don’t think Monokuma would want people piling up in his trial room. Although I might be wrong. Either way.” He shrugged.

“Go on up.” Kenyano’s voice had the same soft sharpness that Komaeda associated with an ambush predator. “I’m handling things down here. And leaving you on your own here is a no-no.”

Nagito walked over and pushed the call button for the elevator. It would be back in a matter of moments. And whatever was waiting for him above – whatever the others had found, or whatever they thought – was something he’d find out for himself. He dreaded it. And because he dreaded it, he also anticipated it. Or rather what came after it. Whatever that would be.

“Say, Kenyano-kun, is the storage room going to remain open? With the same two item rule?” Nagito asked.

“…” Kenyano glanced over at him. “Why don’t you see what the next level looks like before trying to make your next plan?”

“That’s almost a rude thing to say.” At least he thought it was. He seemed to recall having been told that somewhere before. “But alright. I’m sure it’ll be better. I mean – having an actual working bathroom will be nice. Soda and Nidai didn’t want to come see me much when I was tied up. I had to be pretty good at holding it then, haha.”

“…” Kenyano looked away this time. “That isn’t funny.”

“Ah…sorry.”

Another chime as the elevator doors opened. It was time to ascend.

Nagito stepped inside and pushed the button. “Nice coat, Kenyano-kun.”

The doors closed before he could hear Kenyano’s response. With a faint rumble – nothing like the silent movement of the elevator in the Funhouse – Nagito was whisked away to join his classmates. His remaining classmates.

END OF CHAPTER
Number of Students: 14.

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