Moving Foward

by Kimium

Summary

Reincarnation AU. Modern AU.

Sequel to Three Rules.

Their dreams continue as more and more of the truth gets pieced together and lives intertwine.

Notes

Look more! I said snippets... yeah... those are sort of turning into a sequel? Maybe? I'm unsure. I'll just write and see where it goes. Though the chapters are probably going to be a bit shorter than the ones in Three Rules...

Also sorry for taking so long to write this. Being home was nice, but I never realized how distracted from writing I am at home until... well I was distracted.

I hope everyone enjoys the continuation. To be honest I'm still unsure where I'm sitting on... certain elements... particularly relationship stuff. I may change my mind later... but until then
the tags stay as they are. I'm going to be balancing writing this with Liarde's story, so I hope I can write both equally.

As always, feel free to leave a kudos or a comment. Not needed, but always make my day.
“So, where are we going?”

Komaeda looked over as he changed lanes before replying, “It’s just a restaurant. I really like their Western breakfasts.”

“Western breakfasts?” Hajime asked, “Do you prefer those?”

“Only sometimes.” Komaeda replied, “Sometimes it can be… too sweet.”

“You said that when we met at Saionji’s performance.” Hajime said.

“Sweets and me…” Komaeda laughed, “Sometimes there is too much sugar.” He made another turn, “Ah, we’re here.”

Hajime looked out. The restaurant had stairs leading up to it, with a parkade underneath. Komaeda smoothly pulled in and cut the engine. Following him Hajime eyed the building. It was bright, but not overly. Pushing the door Hajime was blasted with a gust of warm air and smoke. He scowled and looked at Komaeda who blushed and shrugged.

“Sorry… I forgot they still have a smoking section.” Komaeda winced, “We can always go to another restaurant?”

“No, this is fine.” Hajime shook his head, “We won’t have time to find another place before seeing everyone.”

“Next time.” Komaeda said.

Next time. That phrase again. Hajime felt his stomach twist in what seemed like the millionth time that day. Shuffling further in Hajime noted that the smoking area was blocked off by doors. It didn’t make it better, but it was preferable. A waiter stood by a podium, smiling as they got closer.

“How many?”

“For two.” Komaeda replied, “And non-smoking. Can we get a booth?”

“Sure, follow me.”

He led them to a booth far away from the smoking room. Hajime shot Komaeda a grateful smile and sat down, pulling the menu from the stand. Opening it up Hajime scanned the daily specials. He wasn’t sure if he could eat a sweet breakfast, but the eggs and sausage didn’t look bad. Hajime continued to flip until he got to the Japanese style breakfasts. Rice… wasn’t what he wanted. He flipped back.

“Have you decided?” Komaeda asked.

“Um… Hajime eyed the choice before making one, “Yeah, I got it.”

“Ok.” Komaeda hit the server button.
A waitress walked up. Her hands shook as she gripped the pen, her notepad pressed up to her chest.

“Hello…” She softly said, “C-can I take your order?”

“Uh right…” Hajime glanced down, “I want your egg and sausage special.”

“Okay…” Her hand trembled as she wrote, “You g-get a drink with that.”

“Oh…” Hajime flipped over to the beverage section, “Uh… coffee.”

She wrote it down and turned to Komaeda, “And for y-you?”

“The pancake breakfast.” Komaeda replied, “And coffee for me too.”

Nodding her pencil flew across the pad of paper before she left them. Immediately Komaeda reached across the table and lightly touched Hajime’s hand. Hajime felt his heart stop, but he didn’t pull his hand away.

“So, are there particular things I should say?”

“What?” Hajime blinked.

“I mean when we go to Kuzuryuu’s house.” Komaeda clarified.

Hajime shook his head, “Just tell them about your dream. That’s what we usually do when we meet.”

“No, I mean…” Komaeda blushed, “I mean I need to be polite…”

“Oh,” Hajime bit his lip to hide the smile that wanted to spread across his face, “It’s fine. Fuyuhiko doesn’t care about things like that.”

Komaeda opened his mouth, but a loud gasp cut him off. Hajime turned his head and saw their waitress stumble over, the tray she was carrying nearly falling out of her hands. The liquid in the cups swayed and some spilled over. She took a few large, shaky steps towards them and regained her balance, but her face was red.

“I-I’m sorry.” She stammered, “I can get you another cup…”

“That’s fine.” Komaeda replied, smiling as he withdrew his hand.

She gave one more stammered apology before she began to give the drinks. Komaeda thanked her and Hajime turned his head to do the same, but out of the corner of his eye he saw another waitress, her hand to her mouth, her eyes twinkling. Hajime blinked and she was out of his sight. A light kick to his leg jolted his mind back. Turning his head Hajime gave their waitress a smile.

“Ah thank you.”

“I-It’s my pleasure.” She said, “Y-your food will be out s shortly.”

She left and Hajime looked at Komaeda who was putting some cream into his coffee, “Sorry I was going to thank her.”

“I just thought she needed a bit of extra kindness after her little stumble.”

Stumble. Hajime ripped open a package of sugar and hummed. The other waitress flashed in his
mind and Hajime shoved that away.

“You’re right.” Hajime began to stir his coffee.

Komaeda sipped his coffee, “Could you tell me who will be there today?”

“Sure,” That was easy enough, “Besides Fuyuhiko you’ll see basically everyone. Though I do warn you I… may have told them about our… misunderstanding.”

The blush returned on Komaeda’s face, “You… told them?”

“Sorry?” Hajime ventured, “I just… I didn’t know what to do.”

“No, that’s fine.” Komaeda shook his head, “I just… this is going to be awkward.”

“It will be awkward anyways.” Hajime muttered, “They already knew we were sort of…”

He paused. Before the misunderstanding Hajime was sure they were dating but what were they doing now? Sure, Komaeda called the brunch a date, but did he really mean that in an official way? He didn’t want to assume; the trust broken needed time to rebuild.

“Sort of dating?” Komaeda finished the sentence with a smile twisted on his lips.

It was Hajime’s turn to blush. He grabbed his coffee and sipped it, his ears burning, “I don’t want to assume…”

“Make no mistake.” Komaeda calmly continued, “Right now the truth feels more like fiction. I’m still a bit unsure about it but…” He reached his hand out again, “I do want to trust you.”

Want to trust. Hajime tried to not let the phrase fill his heart. It wasn’t trust, merely a desire expressed, wishing to trust. Their relationship… whatever it was now, was no where near fixed. Still, it didn’t stop Hajime from reaching across the table and taking Komaeda’s hand in his.

“Take your time.” Hajime softly said, “I want you to reach your decision. Not mine or anyone else’s. But, and this may be a bit repetitive, “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was afraid if I told you the truth would scare you away.”

“I’m sorry.” Komaeda muttered.

“No, don’t apologize it’s…”

A loud crash filled the space. This time Komaeda also turned his head. On the floor, with a red face and scrunched expression was their waitress. Half of Komaeda’s pancakes were off the plate, touching Hajime’s eggs. The maple syrup had spilt over from the small container, soaking the sausages and some of the sausages had rolled onto the tray. Nothing was on the floor, but the presentation of the dishes was ruined. Their waitress held back a sob as she fumbled up. As she did Hajime noted the waitress, the same one who was smiling about the coffee, withdraw her leg. His eyes widened. Did she… trip their waitress?

“Oh, no, are you okay?” Komaeda was standing up, stepping towards her.

“I…” She looked up and Hajime saw her eyes shine, “I’m so sorry…” Her voice cracked.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” Komaeda carefully wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Nothing fell to the ground. We can eat it still.”
“But… the food…”

Hajime pushed his speculation away. He’d worry about his suspicions later. Right now, he had to make sure their waitress wasn’t unfairly reprimanded.

“He’s right, it’s fine we’ll eat it.” Hajime stood up too, gesturing to the table.

“I… I’m not allowed to serve this though… I messed your dishes up…”

“It’s fine…” Hajime searched her apron for a name tag, but there was none.

“Yes, we’ll talk to your manager or supervisor.” Komaeda said, “We’re not upset. These things happen.”

She let out a long sob and a few tears leaked down her eyes, “Y-you mean that?”

“Of course,” Hajime reached for a napkin, “Here, dry your eyes.”

“T-Thank you…” She set the tray on the table and started to wipe her face.

Komaeda sat down and grabbed a handful of napkins, pushing them silently towards her. She inhaled thickly and wiped her eyes one more time before stuffing the napkins into her apron pocket.

“I-I should wash my hands…”

“It’s just tears.” Hajime said, “We’ll be fine.”

“O-Okay…”

She handed the plates, trying to clean the edge where the maple syrup had spilt over. Hajime let her and as she was distracted he grabbed the sausages with his hands, plopping them onto his plate before she noticed.

“Thank you.” Komaeda smiled.

Her mouth opened, but at that moment a lady walked up, wearing clothing a bit more casual. It didn’t take Hajime long to notice her expression, eyes furrowed and a sigh escaping her lips.

“Tsumiki-san, I’ve been informed about your… accident.” Her tone was clipped before she turned to them, “I’m so sorry sirs…”

Tsumiki? Hajime felt the name hit his brain. He had heard that before…

“It’s fine.” Komaeda suddenly straightened up, expression flat, “In fact, Tsumiki-san has been nothing short of wonderful to us. She has been very attentive. Accidents happen. I do hope you take that into consideration.”

Hajime felt his cheeks warm. Komaeda looked so… powerful… in charge. His tone was leaving little to argue and he stole a glance at Tsumiki, who looked like she was about to cry again.

“Yes, I will, though clumsiness is inexcusable in a job like this…”

Clumsiness? Hajime blinked. He was sure the other waitress tripped her. Was he the only one who saw that? Something cold ran through him. She spoke of clumsiness, like it was hand in hand with Tsumiki…
“It wasn’t Tsumiki-san’s fault.” Hajime butted in, “I saw another waitress trip her, I’m sure…”

“Another waitress?” Her eyebrow rose, “I’m sure none of our staff would ever do something so malicious on purpose.”

“But…”

“It’s fine.” Tsumiki suddenly spoke, “I tripped. It was my fault. I’m sorry again.” She bowed.

Hajime stared, wanting to say something, but she shot him a look, her eyes pleading silently. His words died on his lips.

The woman nodded and sighed, “I see. We can fix your meals…”

“No thank you.” Komaeda shot back, “We’re fine.”

Hajime watched as the lady’s face contorted, her lips pursing as she opened her mouth a bit, before huffing, turning away. “Very well. Please enjoy your meal. Tsumiki-san, please come with me.”

As soon as they left Komaeda huffed and chewed a bit viciously at his pancake, “Are you sure you saw a waitress trip her?”

“Yes.” Hajime replied eating his egg. It tasted a bit strange with the maple, but he wasn’t complaining.

“We’ll have to file a formal complaint about it then.” Komaeda sighed, “Shame that sometimes things only change if a customer complains.”

Hajime nodded and looked over at the doors that lead to the staff space. Tsumiki’s face before she left filled his mind. He hoped that telling didn’t stir up more troubles. Holding back a sigh he stabbed a sausage and chewed silently.

~

Walking up to Kuzuryuu’s house, Hajime looked back, watching Komaeda stare at the place. His gaze darted around, drinking in the architecture and the gardens, as Hajime led him through the halls, to the room they always used. He didn’t need to look out at the entrance to know everyone was there; the slippers sat in neat rows. Swallowing Hajime looked at Komaeda as he took his slippers off.

“Ready?” Hajime mouthed softly.

Komaeda nodded and shook his slippers off, placing them neatly at the entrance. Hajime took a deep breath and opened the door. Everyone’s heads snapped up, staring. Biting his lip, Hajime walked in, Komaeda following, shutting the door. Sonia’s hands were frozen as she was reaching for her tea cup. Souda’s mouth was practically on the floor. Saionji was nudging Koizumi who was torn between a glare and a stammer. Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama shot each other a look, but faces showed nothing. Owari merely waved a bit lazily.

“Hello Hajime!” Sonia said, a bit too loudly, “And hello Komaeda-san.”

“Hello… Sonia.” Komaeda slowly said.

Hajime fidgeted and looked at the table. There was a space to sit, but it was only for him. They’d have to squeeze in…
“Please, take a seat!” Sonia continued, scooting over until she bumped into Souda, who began to pinken.

“Yes! Sit down Hajime!” Souda squeaked.

Hajime blinked and looked over at Komaeda, who was frozen in the doorway. A beat past before Saionji snorted and pointed at the space, the sleeve to her kimono flapping. “Well? Sit down we don’t have all day.”

“Right.” Hajime did as she said, patting the space between him, “Komaeda?”

“Ah… yes…” Komaeda walked forward and sat down, their knees brushing as they somehow managed to fit everyone around the table.

“This is why we should have used the other room.” Pekoyama finally said as she reached for the teapot.

“Peko!” Kuzuryuu sighed, “I told you this room is more secluded…”

Saionji coughed, “You can deal with your little domestic debate later. Let’s get to the point.”

“D-Domestic debate?!” Kuzuryuu stammered, eyes widening, cheeks flushing, “Listen here…”

“Enough!” Koizumi placed a hand on Saionji’s shoulder and gave look at Kuzuryuu “Let’s start our meeting.”

Kuzuryuu’s mouth opened a bit before he clamped his jaw shut, “Fine. Hajime.”

Him? Hajime nearly jumped and lifted his hand, gesturing to Komaeda, “Everyone this is Komaeda Nagito, Komaeda this is everyone.”

Various responses came, Sonia and Owari’s cheerful, while Kuzuryuu’s was a grunt of acknowledgement. The rest fell in between. Flushing Hajime cleared his throat.

“Anyways, last time I was… anxious… but we talked and… uh long story short I told him the truth. Oh, also Komaeda had a dream.”

Everything fell out of his mouth in a jumble of words. Hajime felt his blush deepen and his words fall. Thankfully, Komaeda began to speak.

“It’s as Hinata said, I had a… misunderstanding… he told me the truth, though I find it hard to believe…”

“Yet, you had a dream?” Pekoyama recovered and got to the point.

“Yes, I did, though I’m not sure if it was in response to what Hinata told me.”

“I see…” Pekoyama mused, “You’re worried that the dream is in correlation with what Hinata told you, sort of putting the idea in your mind so to speak?”

“That’s a good way to put it.” Komaeda nodded.

Saionji rolled her eyes, “Well, if that’s it we’re all just dreaming the same things coincidently, I suppose? I wonder what that says about our psyche.”

“I don’t care what it says about us.” Kuzuryuu shot back, “Peko and I dreamed the same things and
never told each other for years. I think that implies our dreams aren’t in response to the others’ ideas.”

“We can discuss that boring stuff later.” Owari butt in, grabbing her teacup, “I’m more interested in what Komaeda dreamed up.”

Hajime nodded, grateful for the subject change. “Yes, let’s talk about those. I haven’t drawn it yet, but Komaeda?”

“Okay.” He said, “I had two dreams. The first dream was at the beach, the one with the camera. I was kneeling over Hinata, who was asleep. He started to wake up…”

“Ew, we don’t need to hear about those kinds of dreams.” Saionji groaned.

“I’m sure the dream isn’t like that.” Koizumi assured Saionji before giving a glare to Komaeda, “Right?”

“Uh… right…” Komaeda muttered, cheeks pink, “The second dream was of a movie. It was terrible. I left and saw Hinata outside the theater talking to a stuffed bear.”

“A bear?” He could hear everyone’s various tones of disbelief.

“Haven’t you mentioned a bear before?” Pekoyama mused, looking at Hajime.

Hajime nodded, “Yes, I have at least once.”

“White and black with a red eye on the black side?” Komaeda firmly asked.

“Never dreamed.” Owari muttered, “Anyone else?”

Everyone shook their heads, but Hajime nodded, “I had two dreams, one where the bear looked gleeful in the courtroom. And one where the bear claimed to be the Headmaster of Hopes Peak Academy.”

“Hopes Peak?” Pekoyama muttered, “A school?”

“Never heard.” Kuzuryuu added.

“Me neither.” Souda rubbed his head. “It may not even exist…”

“Uh anyways that’s my dream.” Komaeda finished.

“That’s definitely a different dream.” Sonia brought the attention back to focus, “But hard to place on our timeline.”

She had a point. The dream only had Komaeda and himself. With only two people and not much happening, it was hard to place where they fell. Biting his lip Hajime tried to think, but no one else had ever mentioned a movie theater or the beach in detail.

“Timeline?” Komaeda nudged him.

Hajime jolted, “Oh, yeah, we’ve been making a timeline out of our dreams, considering we’re dreaming the same things. Here, I’m sure we got one somewhere to show you…”

Pekoyama pulled a long sheet of paper from her side, “Here.”
“Thank you.” Hajime set it down, “Let’s get started…”

Komaeda dropped him off at his place. Hajime stretched, brain numb only in the way talking about their dreams left him. Giving Komaeda his best smile, Hajime gave a wave.

“Thanks. Brunch was great. And thanks for coming to Kuzuryuu’s.”

“…No problem Hajime.” Komaeda yawned, “Sorry, I’m exhausted.”

“Right. I won’t keep you. I’ll see you around?” Hajime asked.

“Of course, you will.” Komaeda yawned again, hiding it behind his hand, “Good bye Hinata.”

Getting out of the car, Hajime watched Komaeda drive away before entering his place.

~

Hajime looked at the sorry excuse for prizes. The tote bag was fine, though he questioned the Monomi decal on the corner. The sticker on the other hand… he read the text and winced. It felt more like a passive aggressive note than a gift. Still… he looked over at the doors to the theater. Whatever Monokuma was showing, Hajime was certain he wouldn’t want to watch it. If it came down to the wire, he’d take the sticker over seeing whatever monstrosity Monokuma had created.

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Waking up Hajime rubbed his eyes. Without a single thought, he reached over and grabbed his sketchbook, flipping open, a pencil in hand.

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“I’m just saying, you could have told us you were bringing Komaeda.”

“Would it have made much of a difference?” Hajime leaned into Kuzuryuu’s limo, rubbing his eyes.

“No.” Kuzuryuu bluntly replied, “But it sure would have been nice.”

“Look, I’m sorry, it slipped my mind. I was a bit stressed at the time.”

“Hajime is right.” Sonia piped up beside him, “We shouldn’t be too harsh about it.”

“I agree with Sonia.” Souda said before giving a smile, “Anyways, we shouldn’t be arguing now. Not when we’re seeing Sonia off.”

“Kazuichi is right.” Koizumi nodded, “Arguing before a flight is bad luck.”

“Since when?” Hajime blinked. He had never heard that before.

“Says Mahiru!” Saionji glared, “If she says so, it’s true!”

Hajime sighed, but let it drop, looking over at Sonia, “Have a safe trip.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, “I won’t be gone for too long. It’s just a wedding. I’m so happy you’re all seeing me off.”

“We’ll come pick you up.” Kuzuryuu promised, “Just let us know your return flight details.”
“Are you sure?” Sonia asked, “I would hate to trouble you…”

“Nonsense. We’re more than happy to.” Pekoyama firmly shut her concerns down.

Sonia smiled and blushed a bit, fiddling with her bag. The limo started to pull up to the airport, heading towards the departures. Hajime stared; it had been a while since he had flown somewhere. Pulling up to a loading zone, the limo stopped. Hajime immediately followed Sonia out, ignoring the people’s stares as the driver went to retrieve her bags.

“I wish you accepted the private jet.” Kuzuryuu grumbled, “I hate commercial flights.”

“That would be too much.” Sonia firmly said, “I wouldn’t know where to start in paying you back.”

Kuzuryuu opened his mouth, but Pekoyama lay a hand on his shoulder. Hajime held back a laugh behind his hand as Sonia bounced over, thanking the driver profusely, pulling her suitcase behind her.

“Well, I’m off.” She smiled.

“Let us know when you safely land.” Owari waved, “And take a lot of pictures!”

“I will.” Sonia stepped forward, hugging Owari.

“And don’t forget to let us know your return flight details.” Pekoyama calmly reminded.

“I will.” Sonia gave her a hug too before giving Kuzuryuu a quick one, “Thank you again.”

Kuzuryuu patted her shoulder, face stained pink. Sonia then turned to everyone, giving a hug. Souda stammered and the one with Koizumi turned into a three-armed hug as Saionji got in, making a triangle. Finally, she turned to him. Walking forward Sonia embraced him. Hajime immediately wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

“Be safe.” He wished, “Have a good flight.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Sonia pulled away smiling, giving a small wave, before entering the airport.

~

They barely pulled away from the airport when Souda’s stomach growled loudly. Hajime practically felt the vibrations as Souda flushed, pressing a hand to his stomach.

“Do you want to go somewhere?” Pekoyama asked, blinking.

“Uh…” Souda shifted, “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, it’s fine.” Kuzuryuu cut in, “I didn’t eat a lot either. We can all go out somewhere.”

“Uh, yeah can I take a rain check on that?” Owari raised her hand, “I got to work this afternoon.”

“I got to plan for a dinner party.” Saionji added, scowling.

“Fine, we’ll drop you two off.” Kuzuryuu confirmed, “So, where should we go?”

“Not pizza.” Koizumi requested.
“Anywhere is fine, really.” Souda said.

“Somewhere casual.” Pekoyama mused, “I’d prefer to eat in peace.”

Hajime tapped his chin, “Well, I went to a decent diner with Komaeda recently. We can go there?”

“Okay.” Kuzuryuu confirmed, “We’ll drop Owari and Saionji off first.”

The moment they entered the diner Hajime spotted the waitress that served him and Komaeda, eyes widening. Her hair was uneven, cut at various lengths haphazardly. It looked like someone had cut her hair at random. Her fingers also had some band aids wrapped around them. She was running around, looking like she was busier than she should be. Blinking he looked around. No one else was at the store front, even as they walked inside, he saw no one. Immediately his heart sank. Was this because… of him and Komaeda? Did their complaints make things worse? That… wasn’t it, right? It couldn’t be it…

As they got closer, her gaze shot up and she stared at them, mouth opening. With a quick apologetic glance at a table, she raced over to them. Up close Hajime saw her red cheeks as she gave a wobbly smile.

“Hello! How many?” She asked before staring at Hajime, eyes widening, “Ah… welcome back…”

“Hello.” Hajime greeted, “Tsumiki, right? Table for five.”

Beside him he felt Koizumi stiffen and heard her jilted gasp. Hajime frowned a bit and wanted to turn and look at Koizumi, but he didn’t want to seem rude. Later, he’d ask later.

“Yes…” She nodded, “And right this way…”

She led them to a table and after they were seated Hajime watched her race back to the other table. The couple sitting there began to talk, barely looking up at her. Hajime tore his eyes away and looked over at Koizumi, who was staring at Tsumiki, brow furrowed.

“She is busy.” Pekoyama commented, “Is she the only one out here?”

“Seems so…” Souda muttered, “Did you see her hair?” His tone wasn’t rude.

“Yes…” Pekoyama’s eyes narrowed, “I don’t like that… Hajime, you were here before?”

He nodded, “It wasn’t like that before.” Hajime bit his lip, “I hope… everything went all right.”

“What do you mean?” Kuzuryuu asked.

Hajime fiddled with the menu, “It’s just…” His heart twisted, “I don’t think a co-worker likes her.”

“Are you suggesting this…” Pekoyama paused, “Tsumiki is being bullied at work?”

His mouth opened, but Hajime saw Koizumi shudder again, her gaze still on Tsumiki. It was a cold gaze, something dark behind her eyes. Blinking raised his hand and waved it in front of Koizumi. She snapped her head up and looked at him, scowling.

“What?”

“You’re being quiet.” Hajime frowned, “Is something wrong? You’ve been staring at Tsumiki for a
while.”

Koizumi opened her mouth and then closed it. She stared at him for two seconds before shaking her head, “It’s nothing. Sorry.”

“I don’t think that’s nothing.” Hajime pushed, “You were staring at her intently.”

“Just drop it.” Koizumi scowled, “I told you it’s…”

“H-Hello…”

Tsumiki was standing by the table, a pad of paper out, “Y-you’re ready to order?”

Hajime blinked and looked around the table. Souda waved his hand and nodded. “Yeah, I’d like your…”

“Kazuichi!” Kuzuryuu gave a scowl, “We haven’t even looked at the menu.”

“So?” Souda pouted, “I’m hungry and I know what to eat.” He turned to Tsumiki, “It’s okay, right?”

“Y-yes…” She nodded, “You can just r-ring for me when you’re ready.”

“Great.” Souda launched into his order.

Hajime looked down at the menu, but caught Koizumi in the corner of his eyes. She was still staring at Tsumiki, though not directly, merely under her lashes. The menu was in her hands, but her hands were gripping it tightly. What was wrong? He looked back at Tsumiki, who was finishing writing Souda’s excessive order. She had done nothing to Koizumi… right?

~

“Hey, Koizumi.”

“What?” She turned, stuffing her wallet into her bag.

“I know you told me to drop it, but I can’t help but wonder why you were staring at Tsumiki…”

“I’m not repeating myself Hinata.” She glared, “It’s nothing. I want this topic dropped.”

Hajime opened his mouth, but Koizumi turned to Pekoyama, tapping her on the shoulder, “Hey Pekoyama? We’re close to my place. I think I’m just going to walk back home.”

“Are you sure?” Pekoyama asked, “It’s not a problem.”

“No, no, I mean…” Koizumi fiddled with her bag strap, “Hiyoko is probably itching to phone me and complain about party plans. No doubt she’ll rope me into helping. I best be off.”

“Okay. We’ll see you later.”

Koizumi smiled and turned, giving Hajime one more look. He froze and stared. Her gaze was strong and Hajime felt a shiver run down his spine. The question still floated in his head, but her look said it all. Silently he watched Koizumi walk out of the restaurant.

~

The moment Komaeda walked through his door he waved some tickets at Hajime’s face. Blinking
Hajime stepped back a bit, reaching for his wrist. Komaeda laughed and pulled his arm away, grinning.

“No, no let me tell you.”

“Fine.” Hajime dropped his hand and went to shut the door, “What are the tickets for?”

“So, I never got to apologize for bailing on your gallery.” Komaeda started.

“Uh… you said you were…” The piece clicked in his mind and Hajime flushed, “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” Komaeda blushed a bit, “I still feel bad about it, so…” He pulled the tickets from behind him, “I decided to make it up to you. Or try…” He added with a twist of his lips, “I mean, nothing can really make up for missing a personal event, but…”

Komaeda handed him the ticket. Hajime looked down. “To the…” Hajime blinked as he read the ticket, “You’re joking… I thought this show was sold out…”

“Sold out implies people bought tickets Hinata.” Komaeda poked him lightly, “Will you go out with me to this gallery Hinata?”

Hajime nodded, staring at the ticket for a moment before looking back at Komaeda, “Yes, I would love to.”

~

Pekoyama’s name starkly stood on the screen of his phone. Hajime winced at the harshness of the light and accepted the call as he turned his lamp on.

“Peko.” He greeted.

“I apologize Hajime. I assume it’s earlier than you’d like to be up?”

“It’s fine. I’ve been woken up earlier than this.” Hajime assured, “Just one moment, let me grab my sketchbook…”

“It’s fine… I’m not…” Pekoyama paused, “I’m not even sure I want you to draw this.”

“What?” Hajime blurted out.

“I…” Pekoyama exhaled harshly, “I dreamed of killing someone.”

Killing someone? Hajime reached for his sketchbook, flipping through it, “Hasn’t that…” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

“This time it was different…” Pekoyama’s voice came out quiet, “Fuyuhiko was there and he ordered it. He was smiling as he told me to do it. And I… I did it… exactly as he asked… even after the person died, I kept doing as he asked…”

Pekoyama’s voice choked and broke. Hajime wanted to reach over and pat her on the back, instead he curled his fingers into his blankets.

“I’m sorry.” Pekoyama whispered, “I’ll… leave you to your morning.”

“Wait Peko…”
The call dropped.

As soon as Sonia exited, Souda started to wave, beaming. Sonia’s face lightened and she walked over, pulling a small suitcase behind her. In her arms were a couple of bags, all stuffed rather full.

“Hello everyone!” Sonia said, “You didn’t have to come.”

“No way, we wanted to.” Souda said, “Here, let me help with that…”

“It’s quite all right Kazuichi.” Sonia protested, “I don’t want to make you do anything…”

“I don’t mind.” Souda reassured, “Your hands are a bit full.”

“Well… okay…” Sonia frowned and handed the bags over, “Be careful, I got some snacks in there that are a bit delicate.”

“Right.” Souda gingerly readjusted his grip on the bags, “Fuyuhiko and Peko are already going to get your suitcase.”

Sonia’s eyes widened, “Get my suitcase? How do they know which one is mine?”

Souda shrugged, “I asked the same thing. They didn’t answer me.”

It had been a while since Hajime was at Sonia’s place. Staring he got out of the limo to stretch, but didn’t stray too far. Sonia was most likely exhausted. Patiently he waited as the driver retrieved her bags, Souda at her side, still carrying the bags he got at the airport. Saionji and Koizumi were talking with Sonia as she got her bags, and Owari was practically running around the front lawn.

“Do you want help taking these inside?” Pekoyama’s voice floated over.

“No, it’s fine.” Sonia replied as she fished around her bag, “Though I forgot to ask everyone, which do you prefer, fruit or chocolate?”

“Both are good!” Owari yelled over, her eyes sparkling at the mention of food. “Why?”

Sonia blinked and pointed to the bags Souda was carrying, “Well I wanted to know which cake to open first.”

Cake? Open? Hajime stared. Sonia smiled at them, before her smile dropped and she blinked, “I mean… is it presumptuous of me to invite you without asking if you’re free?”

“Wait… invite us?” Kuzuryuu asked slowly. “Now?”

Sonia blushed, “I just thought… I’m not too tired and…”

“We’d love to come in!” Souda loudly said, deciding for everyone.

The cake chosen in the end was the fruit cake. Hajime stared. How did Sonia manage to take a cake on a plane and have the cake remain intact? The icing wasn’t smeared and the fruit barely looked wilted. Did bakeries in her country also give ice packages when dessert was bought?
Pekoyama dealt with cutting the cake, her slices even. As she divided the cake, Sonia and Saionji worked on the tea, Sonia pouring and Saionji giving the cups to everyone. With a slice of cake and a cup of tea in his hands, Hajime did his best to sit on the couch without making a mess. He couldn’t imagine the cost of the furniture and didn’t want to find out.

“So, let me show the pictures first.” Sonia pulled her laptop out, “I hope everyone can see.”

Nudging a bit closer Hajime watched as Sonia began to show a slideshow of pictures. Everything was lively and bright with an outdoor wedding and many people. Sonia launched into an explanation for everyone without getting boring. She was just getting past the ceremony and onto the reception when someone on the side caught Hajime’s attention.

That hair… it contrasted with the pastels of the wedding. The style of it too… Hajime expected to see hair like that at a metal or rock concert not… a wedding. Metal gleamed from ears and the outfit… was a cross between gothic and punk… were her shoes neon too?

“Question, who is that?” Saionji pointed to the girl, “Her outfit choice is…” Saionji’s nose wrinkled.

Sonia looked and smiled, “Oh, Mioda-san was the musician for the reception. It was… interesting. My cousin always has enjoyed different kinds of music. If I remember correctly, she said she’s from Japan and has been performing all over Europe wherever ever she can.”

That was interesting. Hajime couldn’t imagine a life like that… consistently moving around, looking for work… yet her smile… she was clearly happy.

“Did you… record any of her music?” Souda carefully asked.

“I think I got a video?” Sonia pondered, “Or someone at the wedding did…” She minimized the slideshow and searched through some files before shaking her head, “No… sorry… I’ll ask someone if they did.”

“No need…” Saionji muttered, “I bet it’s weird…”

“Hiyoko!” Owari leaned over, slinging an arm around her shoulders, “You can’t judge without listening…”

Saionji flailed and tried to get Owari off, who was laughing.

~

Despair Disease? Was that real? Hajime was sure it wasn’t, yet Monokuma had already started an explanation, pointing to the people who were sick, stating their conditions. Coward… Gullible… Liar? Hajime stared at Komaeda, who was staring off into space. It… strangely made sense.

Komaeda had denied being ill and was spouting stranger than normal things…

Hajime tucked the information in the back of his mind. It didn’t matter if he believed Monokuma or not, Owari, Mioda, and Komaeda were all flushed, breathing shallowly. They were sick and needed help. Turning to Tsumiki Hajime hoped that, with their help, the task wouldn’t overwhelm her.

~

Mioda. Tsumiki. Hajime stared at his hands. Mioda… was the name of the musician at the wedding. And Tsumiki… Hajime’s head throbbed as questions swirled. Groaning he sat up and opened his sketchbook. Now was not the time for speculation. Quickly he began to write notes in the corner, jotting down every detail.
“They were in your dreams?” Komaeda asked as Hajime drove.

“Yes…” Hajime sighed, “I mean their names appeared… everything was a bit fuzzy… I didn’t really see faces… but it must be them. I mean, that’s usually what happens. I meet the person first or I dream them and then meet them soon.”

“Okay.” Komaeda nodded, “What are we going to do about it though? I mean Mioda. She’s not in the country.”

“We’ll have to focus on Tsumiki.” Hajime muttered, “I hope… this goes smoothly.”

Komaeda snorted, “Yes. Let’s.”

Hajime finished talking and immediately slumped back. Komaeda reached over and grabbed his hand, rubbing circles into it. Everyone was looking down, though Koizumi had that look on her face. It sent Hajime’s brain back into overdrive. It was harder to ignore when Saionji didn’t look any better. Her face was pale and her hands shaking. Multiple times she glanced at the door before glancing at Koizumi. Her hands were twisting into her kimono fabric and Hajime winced as he watched the silk get twisted over and over.

“Tsumiki is our best bet now.” Pekoyama broke their silence, “She’s in the country.”

“I agree.” Kuzuryuu nodded, “We’re going to scout Tsumiki. Who’s going to help me?” He directed his gaze at Hajime.

“Uh…” Hajime blinked.

“You can count us out.” Koizumi spoke up, her voice dull, “If that’s all, we’re leaving.”

Saionji nodded, “Yeah, you’re on your own with this.”

“Hey, wait!” Souda frowned, “You can’t just walk out. We need to discuss things.”

“What else?” Koizumi asked, “We don’t want to help with this. Let us know how it goes.”

Hajime frowned. Her voice and her look. He was getting nothing and avoiding the topic wasn’t going to help them. “You’re doing this again.” He spoke, “What is your problem with Tsumiki? You were strange at the restaurant and now this.”

Koizumi stared at him and Hajime flinched, but he didn’t look away.

“You don’t remember?” She finally asked, “Typical. Hiyoko told you already.”

Told him? Hajime’s eyes widened and he tried to search his memory, but got nothing. His silence didn’t help. Without another word, Saionji and Koizumi left the room. Hajime stared at the door. Should they go after them? He glanced over at everyone else.

“Don’t bother.” Kuzuryuu sighed, “We’ll work at that later. So, who is going to help me?”

Chapter End Notes
Japanese Breakfast: Traditionally a Japanese breakfast is rice, miso soup, fish, salad, and pickled daikon.

Smoking inside: Yes, Japanese restaurants still let that happen. I personally find it gross. I'm not commenting on anyone's life style, just personally I don't want to breathe that in.

Server button: As a reminder, most restaurants in Japan have a button you hit when you're ready to order.

Pancakes: I'm basing this off of me and the fact that sweet breakfasts aren't my thing unless it's a pancake or waffle breakfast. I imagined Komaeda the same.

Ice packages: In Japan when you buy cake at bakeries they will package it with small disposable ice packages. Sometimes, people can request ice packages that will last for quite a while.
-Frustrated groan- I am so sorry for the short chapter... however... this felt like a good place to end.

Finally! I got to write a big chunk of Tsumiki scenes. I've had these planned and it's so satisfying to check scenes off of my list (I seriously make lists of scenes to write when I'm bored and not at my computer).

I hope everyone enjoys this. I had a blast writing the Tsumiki scenes. Also, as a mini PSA here, I decided for The Impostor to be using Mitarai's name. I kept the appearance based off of DR 3 when they take off Mitarai's form. Finally, I write the Impostor with "they" and "them" pronouns.

Thank you for all the kind messages and kudos. I appreciate the support for this fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t believe we got roped into this…” Hajime groaned and looked out of the car, “Do you think it’s too late to not go inside?”

“Kuzuryuu would find us.” Komaeda calmly said, “In fact, he might have men stationed around this area to prevent that. He’s probably done a lot of research for this, gathered intel.”

“Komaeda…” Hajime groaned again, “It isn’t like that.”

“Right.” Komaeda laughed, “Let’s go.”

Little choice. Hajime exited and locked the car. Komaeda immediately laced their hands together. They walked in together, Hajime scanning the restaurant. At a table, Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama were already there. A waiter stood at the front desk. After telling him they already had a table, they walked over. Hajime immediately sat down, menu in hand. He wasn’t hungry, but they’d have to order something.

“So, this zone is Tsumiki’s.” Kuzuryuu greeted, “She’s going to start her round in about two minutes. The moment she’s out, hit the button. She’ll probably want to come over to us sooner because you two just arrived. Everyone around us has already ordered.”

Komaeda shot Hajime a look. Hajime wanted to smack his head against the table. The doors to the kitchen opened, stopping him. Tsumiki walked out, a girl trailing behind her. Hajime felt his heart ache upon seeing her. Tsumiki's face was red and her hair looked worse, chunks clearly uneven at a distance. Around her one leg was a bandage and her hands were plastered in band aids.

“What happened?” Komaeda softly asked.

“I don’t know…” Hajime tore his gaze and focused on the menu, “But I think… bullying?”

Hajime could feel Komaeda’s frown, “That’s disgusting.”
“I know…” Hajime reached over and hit the server button, “Let’s talk to her.”

“Good idea.” Pekoyama nodded, “Maybe you can get a bit more out of her. We only got an order of drinks.”

Tsumiki walked over to their table, her eyes lighting up with recognition. Stammering she gave Hajime and Komaeda a rather long look, eyes darting over to the other waitress who walked out with her.

“Hello… can I take your order?” She softly asked.

“Uh…” Hajime stared at the menu.

“We’d like a cup of coffee.” Komaeda easily said, “Also, your dessert special sounds great, could you tell me a bit more?”

What was he doing? Hajime opened his mouth, but Komaeda grabbed his hand from under the table, squeezing it.

“Our… cakes are on a discount…” Tsumiki started, but her eyes kept darting to her co-worker, “If you get two slices your coffee comes with it…”

“Perfect and that’s for any cake on the menu?”

“Yes…”

“Okay.” Komaeda looked at Hajime, “Want a slice?”

“Um…” Hajime stared at the menu, flushing. What kind of cake did they have anyways? “Yes…” He started his answer.

“Could you tell me what kind of cake you have?” Komaeda continued.

“Vanilla… chocolate…”

Tsumiki began to list the cakes off, but her eyes kept darting over to the other waitress. Hajime followed her gaze. The other girl was leaning against the front desk, staring directly at Tsumiki. Hajime nearly jumped. What was that? Why was she staring and not working?

“Thank you. I think we want two slices of your chocolate orange cake.” Komaeda easily said.

What? Hajime returned his gaze to the table and watched as Tsumiki nodded and wrote the order down before bouncing off. He turned his gaze to Komaeda, to ask what the order was about, but Pekoyama nudged her head. Hajime followed her cue and watched as Tsumiki walked over to the kitchen, going past the front desk. The waitress stopped her, her hand coming up to grab Tsumiki’s arm. Hajime stared as she talked, getting closer to Tsumiki, who was trying to pull away. He turned his gaze to Komaeda, who was watching, his face blank.

“I thought so…” Komaeda muttered, “Disgusting.”

“You can say that again…” Kuzuryuu glowered, “I watched the other waitress the entire time. She barely helped a single table and then just went over to stare at Tsumiki.”

Hajime felt his brain click. “Wait, you wanted to take up her time to see how the other waitress would react? I thought this was about Tsumiki, not her work place.”
“It is.” Kuzuryuu calmly said, “We now have something to talk about when she returns… still… didn’t you say you two were here before? Did you notice anything like that?”

“Yes.” Komaeda immediately answered, “Hinata is sure a co-worker tripped her and caused her to nearly drop our order. “I’m sure it was that waitress we just saw. We mentioned it to the manager… but she was… dismissive.”

Kuzuryuu glared in the general direction of the staff area. Hajime slouched forward and pulled a menu out. Their scouting of Tsumiki was morphing into a discussion of her work place. Not that Hajime was complaining; the conditions Tsumiki was working in wasn’t ideal.

“Dismissive, huh?” Kuzuryuu muttered.

“Either way, we have a conversation starter.” Pekoyama calmly said, “Let’s see if that works.”

Hajime didn’t have time to respond. Tsumiki came into his view of vision. She was wobbling as she walked and by the time she got over to them, Hajime was sure she had spilt some of the coffee onto the cake.

“H-here.” She stammered, setting the tray down and glancing at it. Her face paled.

“No. It’s fine.” Komaeda cut in, “Really. You’re working so hard. If you don’t mind me saying… you look a bit worn out.”

Tsumiki blushed, “I… It’s been a bit of a long day. Ah… not that I’m upset to serve you…”

“No, no I get it.” Komaeda smiled, “We’re not insulted. Actually, I wanted to ask…”

“Tsumiki! I need your help.”

She jumped and turned. The waitress, the one Hajime kept seeing, was standing there, arms crossed, “There are customers at the front waiting to be seated.”

“Ah, I’m sorry!” Tsumiki quickly unloaded the coffee and cake, “I’ll go seat them.” She stumbled off.

“Yeah… go do that…” She muttered, “Loser…” She huffed and walked off, circling around some tables, her gaze never leaving Tsumiki.

Hajime stared. Did she just…? Out of the corner of his eye he saw Komaeda stiffen and Kuzuryuu’s gaze sharpen. He… wasn’t imagining that? Tsumiki was leading another customer to a table, nearly tripping over her feet. The couple sighed and sat down. Hajime adjusted his gaze to Tsumiki, who was hobbling back over to the kitchen.

“Did you hear that?” Pekoyama asked, “It appears the biggest problem Tsumiki is facing work related.”

“That still doesn’t let us know if she remembers anything.” Hajime pointed out, “And we don’t have a lot of time to talk to her here.”

“Should we try to befriend her?” Komaeda asked, “So far she hasn’t reacted to anyone. The only people she hasn’t seen are Owari and Saionji.”

“Yeah and I’m sure Saionji doesn’t want to come,” Kuzuryuu sighed, “Before Koizumi left, she mentioned that she told you something Hajime. Do you know what she’s talking about?”
Hajime frowned and shook his head, “I’m sorry… I hear a lot of dreams and sometimes I forget some. I don’t even know if it’s something said in passing or something I’ve drawn…”

“You could check that later.” Komaeda reminded him, “I mean, if you’ve drawn it then surely…”

A loud crash filled the restaurant. Hajime whipped his head over. The couple, the one Tsumiki had seated, were sitting there, covered in food. Tsumiki was on the ground, trembling as she scrambled up. Her face was gleaming and Hajime felt a lump fill his throat. Standing up immediately she stared at the couple. Their faces were contorted and Tsumiki was bowing, apologies spewing from her lips. At the side was the waitress, smiling. Hajime felt his blood heat. How could this girl just… be so malicious to Tsumiki? He stood up, heart pounding into his rib cage.

“Are you fucking kidding me? This cost money! And you ruined it with your clumsy little act!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it was an accident. Please… forgive me…”

“Are you so incompetent you can’t carry a single fucking tray?” The voice grew louder, “Where is your manger? I want to speak with them.”

“I…” Tsumiki stammered, “I…” Tears started to run down her face.

“Well? Quit crying like a child!” Hajime was sure spit flew into Tsumiki’s face, “And go get your manager!”

She burst into a loud sob and stumbled backwards. Hands were on her mouth as she thickly swallowed, face red. Hajime gaped, heat rising inside of him. How could someone just sit there and yell at her? He wanted to walk over, but his body felt numb.

“Peko.”

“Yes.”

Kuzuryuu was standing, already walking over, hands in his pockets. Hajime’s heart froze and he watched as Kuzuryuu walked over, Pekoyama trailing a bit behind him. Staring all Hajime could do was watch as Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama approached Tsumiki. With an almost gentle touch, Pekoyama carefully wrapped an arm around Tsumiki.

“Hey asshole.” Kuzuryuu’s voice rang clearly, loudly, “I believe an apology to this waitress is in order.”

“Fuck off this isn’t any of your business.”

“You’re an embarrassment to us all.” Kuzuryuu continued, “What kind of high do you get from yelling at a waitress? Or is your life so out of control you need to take it out on someone?”

“I thought I said this isn’t any of your business, boy.” They spat back.

Kuzuryuu’s eyes narrowed and Hajime felt his heart stop. There was a darkness swirling behind his eyes. Kuzuryuu’s head tilted a bit until, despite his stature, it felt like he was looking down on them. The atmosphere chilled and slowly Kuzuryuu took a step forward.


Their mouth opened and stammered. Kuzuryuu took a step forward, “Or… are you saying that I need to… persuade you into apologizing?”
Before anyone could say anything else, the manager appeared, along with the other waitress. Her eyes widened when she took in the scene and immediately she turned to Tsumiki, who jumped out of Pekoyama’s embrace.

“What happened here?” She asked.

“I…” Tsumiki looked down.

“I’ll tell you what happened.” The person started to stammer, “Your clumsy waitress tripped and ruined my clothing. She then didn’t want to apologize and before I knew it this… child came up demanding I apologize instead.”

She sighed, “I thought so… Tsumiki, Aya has informed me what she saw and…”

“Cut the bull shit.” Kuzuryuu cut her off, glaring at the customer, “Tsumiki was apologizing and you were yelling at her, swearing at her. I can’t stand seeing that sort of shitty behaviour, so I came over here to make sure you apologized.”

“Sir, I know you witnessed it, but you’re a bystander to this. I’ll have to ask you write it up formally and…”

“I said, cut the bull shit.” Kuzuryuu’s glare intensified, “You’ve only heard two sides of the story. Why don’t you listen to Tsumiki’s?”

“With all due respect, sir, she’s my employee and I should be the one in charge of sorting this manner out…”

“I see.” Kuzuryuu straightened up and glanced at the couple, “You’ll back up assholes like this because you’re scared of losing money. You are blindly accepting only one side of the story without the other.”

Hajime stared as the manager’s face started to turn red. Her gaze sharpened and she stepped a bit forward, “Sir, if you’re going to continue I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Oh, I will.” Kuzuryuu snapped, “Peko. We’re taking Tsumiki. Good day.” He turned around.

“You’ll still need to pay.” The waitress added, almost smug.

Kuzuryuu turned back and Hajime watched as the waitress flinched. With a calm motion Kuzuryuu reached into his pocket and pulled out a pad of paper. Opening it he slowly turned to Tsumiki and plucked her pen from her apron pocket.

“How much do you make an hour?”

“W-What?” She stammered.


“That’s criminal.” Kuzuryuu replied, “And I assume you like a two-week notice prior to quitting yes?”

“Most places do.” Pekoyama replied again.

“Okay.” Kuzuryuu scribbled on the paper, “Consider this as Tsumiki’s two-week notice. Of course, she would work her shifts in the two weeks under normal circumstance. But, I don’t think it’s healthy for her to do that.”
Kuzuryuu continued to write, “Adding today… and I’ll just assume she’s working the full fourteen days, eight hours per shift… there.” He ripped the paper out, “You’re such shitty people I assume you’d try to get out of paying her, so I wrote you a note. I expect to hear you paid Tsumiki this by the end of today.”

“Y-you…” The manager was red in the face, “You can’t tell me what to do. She can’t be paid if she isn’t working that’s…”

“Illegal?” Pekoyama supplied, “So is workplace harassment. I’m sure we can report that.”

Kuzuryuu snorted, “So, pay Tsumiki properly and all will go well.”

“You can’t think you can blackmail me.” The manager firmly said, “I’ll report you for physical assault.”

“Go for it.” Kuzuryuu rolled his eyes, “Just tell them it was Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko, okay?”

Her eyes widened and Hajime couldn’t help but stifle a laugh. Giving a smug smile, Kuzuryuu pocketed the pen and notepad before pulling his wallet out. Opening it he flung a small wad of cash at them.

“Keep the change. And consider the ruined meal as well our entire table’s food paid. We’re leaving. Good bye.”

That was their cue. Hajime tugged Komaeda and with almost wooden limbs, he exited the restaurant, mentally checking it off as “places he couldn’t revisit.”

“~~

“What was that?” Komaeda burst as soon as they were outside. “I mean… it’s nice you stood up for Tsumiki-san, but…”

“I-I’m so sorry!” Tsumiki finally stammered, face pale, “I’ve caused so much problems… and…” She burst into another round of tears, “I-I have no job…”

“Uh… sorry about that.” Kuzuryuu rubbed his head, shooting a glare at the restaurant, “I just hate seeing others trampled on. Besides, you’re too good for that place.”

“And… my stuff…” Tsumiki was still crying, “I… need to grab it…”

“I got that.” Pekoyama calmly stepped away, “If you don’t mind?”

“No, it’s fine.” Tsumiki stammered, “I’ll go get it…”

“You’re staying put.” Pekoyama firmly said, “I don’t mind. Tell me what does your bag look like?”

“It’s in my locker… number three… it’s a blue bag…”

“Okay.”

Pekoyama strolled back towards the diner. Hajime stared and felt his face flush at the idea of returning after their display. Though, he was sure if anyone could return and do it gracefully, it would be Pekoyama. Returning his attention to Tsumiki, Hajime carefully walked over and lightly patted her back, hoping she wouldn’t mind. Her sobs grew louder and she curled closer to him. Hajime nearly stumbled back.
“S-sorry…” Tsumiki blubbered, “I’m just…” She looked over at Kuzuryuu, “T-thank you… uh… Kuzuryuu-san. I… I don’t know how to repay you.”

“No need.” Kuzuryuu shook his head, “Where do you live? We can drop you off, if you like.”

Tsumiki’s eyes widened and she pulled out of Hajime’s arms, “I… I couldn’t ask that of you… I can just…”

“I’m not forcing you…” Kuzuryuu said, “I just thought… you wouldn’t want to use public transport after… today…”

A blush filled her face and she looked down, “Then… if it’s not too much of a hassle…”

Pekoyama returned at that moment, carrying a bag. Tsumiki turned and immediately walked over, taking the bag, pressing it to her chest. “T-thank you.”

“Now, let’s go?” Pekoyama smoothly asked, “Where are we taking you?”

“J-just… I got a friend…” Tsumiki softly started, “If… you don’t mind.”

“No problem.” Kuzuryuu turned and gestured to Hajime, “Well?”

Hajime jumped and looked over at Komaeda, “We drove here ourselves and…”

“I’ll send someone to bring your car back.” Kuzuryuu cut him off.

Hajime blinked, “You… can do that? But my keys…”

Kuzuryuu looked at him, eyebrows raised. Hajime clamped his mouth shut and blushed. Oh. He… probably didn’t want to know… biting his lip he nodded and followed Kuzuryuu to the limo, Tsumiki in tow.

~

“To here please.” Kuzuryuu showed an address on his phone to the driver.

“Yes sir.”

Hajime got inside the limo, comfortably sitting down. How the limo came back quickly was a mystery to him. One that he was probably never going to get solved. Tsumiki followed, her eyes widening as she sat down, legs close together, bag on her lap. As soon as she sat down, Tsumiki started to dig around her bag, pulling out a bit of tissues, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose.

“T-this is really nice…” She softly said.

“It is.” Hajime smiled, “Would you like something to drink?” He gestured to the mini fridge.

“I…” Tsumiki’s eyes widened, “Is… that okay?” She glanced at Kuzuryuu who merely gave a head nod.

“Sure.” Hajime answered for him, “Fuyuhiko has everything here, I swear.”

“Not everything.” Pekoyama coughed, moving to sit beside Tsumiki, “But we do have a wide selection… pop… juice… iced tea…”

Tsumiki stared and bit her lip, “Um… water?”
“Sparkling, Flavoured, or regular?” Pekoyama immediately asked.

“I…” Tsumiki gaped.

“We have strawberry, berry, lime, lemon, and grapefruit flavoured water.” Pekoyama listed, as though that was the problem Tsumiki was facing.

“Just… regular…” Tsumiki stammered.

“Very well.”

Komaeda nudged Hajime as he plopped down beside him, lacing their fingers together, “Wow, are you going to offer me anything Hinata? This is my first time in the limo.”

Hajime turned and saw Komaeda’s eyes sparkling. Laughing a bit, he leaned closer, “Sure, what do you want?”

“I was teasing.” Komaeda hummed, “But lemon water sounds great.”

“Okay.” Hajime reached forward and thanked Pekoyama when she passed the bottle over.

“Y-you’re so kind…” Tsumiki muttered as she twisted the bottle open.

“You deserve it after today.” Kuzuryuu replied. “Sorry again about blowing up in there. But I did mean it, you are wasted there. Why were you staying? That waitress… Aya? She was clearly bullying you.”

“I…” Tsumiki sipped the water, “I… know… just… she’s the manager’s daughter and I didn’t want any troubles.”

“Daughter.” Kuzuryuu spat the word, “I see…”

“And… I…” Tsumiki looked down, “I need the money… until I can get the job I want…”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what is it?” Komaeda asked.

“Uh… I’m a nurse… or at least… I did my degree for it…” Tsumiki muttered, “I haven’t found anything…”

Hajime blinked and felt something tingle in the back of his mind. Nursing… that sounded familiar… did that come up in his dream? He mentally noted it and looked out the tinted window. They… still had nothing on her… to see if she remembered. What could he say to try and poke at it?

“Oh, so you graduated?” Komaeda kept up the questions.

“Yes… I finished before Christmas and then did a practicum after the break.” She replied.

“Hopefully that will be us soon.” Komaeda added, “We’re all still students.”

“R-really?” Tsumiki smiled a bit, “W-what are you studying?”

“I’m business. Hinata is an art student.” Komaeda easily answered, “I’m not sure what Kuzuryuu or Pekoyama are doing though…”

“Political and International studies.” Kuzuryuu answered.
“Political studies and Japanese Culture and History.” Pekoyama replied, “Really, I think Hajime is the most interesting out of us all.”

“Me?” What did she mean? Hajime pointed to himself, jaw slack, “I think Japanese Culture and History is interesting too. I mean, History is my minor…”

Pekoyama shot him a look, “I mean it. Hajime is very talented. You should see his art.”

Oh. Hajime felt his cheeks stain. That… was what she was getting to. Pulling his phone out, Hajime quickly selected his newest safe-to-see piece, the theater.

“Here.” He turned his phone, “This is recent.”

“Oh wow… it is a theater?” Tsumiki stared, “But it’s so small?” Her eyes widened and she reached forward, “What’s that on the counter?”

“Oh that?” Hajime turned his phone around, “A tote bag and a sticker?” He zoomed the image in.

Tsumiki nodded and stared, “That’s… interesting to put there…” She leaned back into the limo, “You’re very talented Hinata-san. I can almost imagine myself in there.”

Really? Hajime mentally thanked Pekoyama, “It’s quite a small theater, I’m sure none of us have been in one so small.”

“R-right.” Tsumiki blushed.

Hajime scrolled through his phone, “I also got a…”

The car stopped. Hajime held back a swear. Darn… they got so little out of her… but he couldn’t push it. Tsumiki bowed and started to stand up, hands flailing a bit as she held the water bottle. Pekoyama gently pushed it towards her.

“Keep it.” Pekoyama kindly said, “Is this address correct?”

Tsumiki glanced out the window, “Yes… it is… though I’m not sure if they’re home…”

“Do you want us to wait, just in case?” Kuzuryuu asked it, but he was already getting out.

Tsumiki didn’t reply, though Hajime saw her blush. Following Kuzuryuu’s obvious cue to stay with her, he shuffled out. The area was a residential one, with small town houses. Tsumiki walked up to a house, with no name on the front, and rang the bell. A long silence passed, before the door opened.

The person who opened the door looked so… ordinary… Hajime stared. Their hair was brown… or was that black? It was a bit long, pushed back, revealing a round face. The clothes worn were non-descript and Hajime was sure in a crowd he’d easily miss them.

“Mikan?”

“M-Mitarai…” Tsumiki stammered.

“I… what are you doing here?” They asked, voice kind, “I thought you were working?”

“Um…” Tsumiki blinked before tears welled up in her eyes, “I sort of got… fired… but I mean not really… you see Kuzuryuu-san was standing up for me and…” She began to sob.

Mitarai opened their arms and Tsumiki threw herself into them, sobbing into their chest. Rubbing her
shoulders a bit, Mitarai looked at them and smiled.

“You brought Mikan back.” They said, “Thank you. Though I am curious to hear what happened.”

“Long story short she was being bullied and I didn’t like that.” Kuzuryuu simply replied, “I sort of spoke for her and… told them she was quitting.”

“It’s not your fault.” Tsumiki managed to sob out.

“There, there.” Mitarai rubbed her shoulders, “Still, thank you for looking out for her. That’s awfully nice of a stranger to do.”

“I just did what anyone should do.” Kuzuryuu shrugged, “Anyways, we just wanted to make sure she got somewhere safely. We’ll be off now.”

“Thank you again.” Mitarai called out.

~

After Kuzuryuu dropped him back home, Hajime tried to not blink at seeing his car on the driveway, walked through his door, and flopped down onto the couch. The day was… a disaster. He melted into the couch, pulling the pillow over. It felt like minimal had happened. They were no where close to figuring out if Tsumiki remembered, yet he was exhausted. He instantly drifted off.

~

“That’s it?” Koizumi huffed as Kuzuryuu finished talking.

“Yes, that is.” He scowled, “I don’t see why you’re complaining; you and Saionji bailed so fast you would think the room was on fire. Since you two contributed nothing I think you can remain silent.”

Koizumi gaped a bit.

“Unless, you’re willing to tell us why you left in such a hurry.” Kuzuryuu added, tone snarky.

She opened her mouth a bit, but eventually closed it, slumping forward. Kuzuryuu snorted and looked over at him, “Hajime, did you look to see if you drew the reason Koizumi and Saionji are being difficult about Tsumiki?”

“Uh… sorry…” Hajime blushed, “I fell asleep as soon as I got home…”

Kuzuryuu glared and Hajime shrunk a bit.

“Anyways… we also got some other things.” Pekoyama took over, giving both sides of the room a look, “Here.”

She tossed a sheet of paper down. On it was basic information on Tsumiki, including her cell number. Hajime gaped and looked up.

“T-that’s probably illegal.” Souda stammered.

Both Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama raised their eyebrows and looked at each other. Sonia coughed and leaned forward, taking a closer look.

“That’s impressive… why did you get this?” She asked.
“Glad you asked.” Kuzuryuu said, “Tsumiki mentioned being a nurse and I felt a bit bad about… Tsumiki’s lack of a job… so… I was thinking of… fixing that.”

~

After the hectic couple of days, Hajime was more than happy to put on one of the suits Kuzuryuu had bought for him (dark grey with a burgundy shirt and barely, there light blue tie). The tie took a couple of tries, but Hajime was sure that he had done it correctly. Straightening the fabric one final time, Hajime walked out.

Komaeda was sitting on the couch, already dressed in a dark suit with a dark green and neutral coloured tie. Upon seeing him, Komaeda stood up, twirling his car keys, “Shall we… Hinata.”

“What?” Hajime stopped walking and felt his heart freeze. He… was fine… right?

“Where’s your pin?”

“Ah…” Hajime blinked before it clicked into place, “The Kuzuryuu pin? It’s on the other suit I thought…”

“Put it on.” Komaeda requested.

“What?” Hajime stared, “Dare I ask why?”

Komaeda blushed, “It’s just… sort of fun to see everyone a bit wary of you.”

He wanted the pin because… he enjoyed everyone’s reactions? Hajime nearly laughed, face a bit red. “Are you sure? I mean my association with Kuzuryuu doesn’t always leave the best impressions…”

“Please?” Komaeda breathed.

Hajime felt a warmth pool into his stomach. He turned around and went back to his room, locating the pin.

~

Staring at the art, Hajime wanted to simultaneously touch it and run away, stomach churning. At a distance, the sculpture of a cake looked down right appetizing, but up close… it was horrific. Teeth and glass eyes decorated the sides, and hair made up the top decoration. The part that made up the icing looked a bit moldy. Stepping back, Hajime decided maybe it was time to find Komaeda, see the second exhibit, but as he backed up he stepped on something hard.

“Watch where you’re going, boy.” A woman’s voice called out.

“I’m sorry…” Hajime winced and turned around.

“You better be I should…” Her voice died.

Hajime blinked and stepped back, giving her space, bowing, “Once again… sorry ma’am… I…”

“Hinata!” Komaeda walked up, “There you are I was looking for you. Come, let’s see the second exhibit…”

His voice died before a smile filled his face, “Ah, Ichiro-san, it’s a pleasure to see you.” Komaeda quietly slipped beside Hajime before lacing their arms together.
“Nagito-kun.” Her voice trailed off, “How are you this evening?”

“I’m splendid. I hope all is well with you too?”

“Yes…” She was staring at them.

“That’s wonderful to hear.” Komaeda beamed, “Now, if you’ll excuse us, Hinata has been dying to see the second exhibit. I don’t want to keep it from him.”

Komaeda tugged him, pulling Hajime away. They got out of her eye sight, before Komaeda laughed a bit, unlacing their arms.

“Did you step on Ichiro-san’s foot?” He asked, eyes dancing.

“I didn’t mean to…”

“The look on her face when she saw your pin.” Komaeda stifled a smile, “That may entertain me for the rest of the evening. Though she’ll probably gossip like mad about us.”

Gossip? That didn’t sound good. “I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine.” Komaeda shook his head, “I expected this when I invited you. Don’t worry, they’ll grow tired of it eventually.”

Eventually was the keyword.

~

The evening ended with a kiss, or maybe it began? Hajime wasn’t sure, but then again last time they ended a date with Komaeda kissing him, a phone call interrupted. This time, Hajime was sure to turn his phone to silent. Pressed up against the door, Hajime opened his mouth and moaned as Komaeda deepened their kiss. All protests demanding clarification to where Hajime stood on the scale of “dating or not?” was thrown out the window.

“God, you’re good.” Komaeda broke their kiss, a bit of saliva falling from his lips.

“K-Komaeda…” Hajime felt heat swimming through him.

“No… call me… Nagito please.” Komaeda asked.

How could he say no? “Nagito…” Hajime tested the name.


That shouldn’t have made Hajime feel light headed, but it did. Pulling Komaeda a bit closer he felt their lips brush and could see the heat radiate off Komaeda’s face.

“Stop me if it gets to be too much, okay?”

“Okay.” Komaeda whispered.

Hajime pulled him closer and kissed him hard.

~

Hajime felt like his heart had been shot. It fell through his rib cage, into his stomach in a bloody pile
of mush. How... was that possible? He couldn't have been gone for more than ten minutes... how was there a second victim?

His vision felt like it was being filtered through a tube, black around the edges as it shook violently. Oxygen escaped, wheezing out of cracks as Hajime wanted to fall to the floor.

Besides the hanging body from the baton, there, on the pillar was Saionji. She was taped to it, her kimono a bit askew. The tape ran all the way up her body, around her neck. Hajime spotted a bit of red staining the tape. Was... her throat slit? Hajime shivered and immediately touched his neck. He didn’t even want to imagine the situation, but there was no denying it. Saionji... was also dead.

The familiar jingle started on the monitor and all Hajime wanted to do was smash the TV and rewind time, back to when no one was dead and they were all happy.

~

Damn, damn. Hajime sat up, sweat pouring down his face. Everything had been going so well too. His date with Komaeda, their little kissing session... it all swirled away as the dream stood starkly in his mind. Sitting up he reached for his sketchbook, wanting to cry. He knew Saionji had died... but to see her body... taped to a pillar... he violently shook as he began to lightly sketch it out.

~

Everyone silently passed the sketchbook around. Hajime watched intently as everyone looked, varying expressions filling their faces, but the one Saionji gave nearly made him jump. A sob escaped her throat and she reached for Koizumi’s hand, gripping it so tightly Hajime could see white.

“Here.” Komaeda returned it to him.

“Thanks...” Hajime quickly shut it. “So...that’s what I dreamed...”

Silence. Hajime shuffled, setting the book down. “Sorry...”

“It’s fine.” Koizumi forced, “Did you... happen to see anything else?”

Anything else? Hajime shook his head, “No... just a mystery body and Saionji.”

“I see...”

“Well we were aware Saionji died...” Sonia muttered, “But not the mystery person. I wonder who that is.”

“I couldn’t tell.” Owari mused, “A bag over the head? Someone didn’t want anyone to see the victim, huh?”

Hajime winced. Why was there a bag? Was it out of respect, or something else? He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Either way...” Pekoyama carefully said, “That’s... nine dead people so far in our dreams...”

“And out of those nine, four are unknown.” Souda muttered.

Great. That was a cheerful figure. They still didn’t know how many people were on the island, but nine was still a big enough number. Hajime wished he could share a happier dream.

“Anyways...” Kuzuryuu slowly said, “On a stranger note, I did a bit of... research on Tsumiki’s
friend… but I got nothing.”

“Dare I ask why you were researching that?” Souda dryly asked.

Kuzuryuu glared.

“Nothing?” Owari shrugged before elbowing Souda, “That happens. There has to be a lot of people with the name… Mitarai?”

“That’s it… there is, but I limited it by age… but I only got one result. The result, however, was clearly not the person Tsumiki is friends with.”

“Does it matter?” Saionji’s voice was shaky, “If she shows no sign of remembering, don’t worry too much. Besides what makes you think her friend has anything to do with this?”

“Nothing.” Kuzuryuu easily replied, “I was just curious. And speaking of curiosity… you haven’t told us why you’re so hostile towards Tsumiki yet.”

Saionji weakly glared at him, “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“No, you don’t.” Pekoyama answered for Kuzuryuu, “It would however make this easier for us.”

“I…” Saionji turned her head, “I don’t want to say.”

“Ok. So, keep silent when we talk about Tsumiki then.” Kuzuryuu snapped, “It’s getting a bit old, these passive aggressive remarks about her. If you don’t want to talk about her fine. You can leave again.”

Saionji curled closer to Koizumi, who looked torn between glaring and rubbing her face. Owari frowned and stared at them for a long moment.

“This isn’t like you two at all.” She finally spoke, “Mahiru… Hiyoko… you’re not usually so aggressive. Can’t you tell us what’s wrong?” Owari’s brow furrowed, “Does it have to do with…?”

She cut herself off and took a deep breath before speaking again, “Does it have to do with Hiyoko’s death?”

Hajime could hear a pin drop in the room. Eyes widened and Sonia’s hands flew to her mouth. Everything froze and Hajime felt the memory hit him full force. How… could he have forgotten that? Saionji mentioned it… she had dreamed it… she had mentioned her death and who killed her.

“I… I’m so stupid…” Hajime muttered. “You… did tell me… and I forgot.”

“Hinata… don’t…” Koizumi tried to weakly say.

For a moment, Hajime considered not, but… it wasn’t beneficial to the group. He took a deep breath, “You told me… that Tsumiki killed you… Saionji…” Hajime’s voice was barely above a whisper, “Right?”

Saionji’s eyes were wide with tears and her mouth was twisted into something sharp. Hajime felt his stomach churn and his mind ache as he pieced it together. He didn’t need an answer. Her expression did it for her. Composing herself Saionji hid her expression and stood up, storming out of the room. Koizumi jumped up and looked at everyone, face torn between emotions, before following Saionji.

Hajime felt his heart sink.
Flopping down onto the dojo floor Hajime accepted the water Pekoyama offered him. The events were still muddled in his brain, but working it out turned out to be good. He’d have to consider doing this a little more frequently.

“Your holds are better.” Pekoyama started to offer critique, “You’re also improving at getting out of holds. We still need to work on aggression though. You want to be crisp and clean the first time. The first strike is always the crucial one. It takes people by surprise. If you fail, it makes the job harder.”

“Right.” Hajime nodded, “Thank you Peko.”

“No problem.” She turned to Souda, “And you Kazuichi… you are great at getting away from holds, but we should work on executing a hold. Once you got one though, you’re solid.”

“Thanks Peko.” Souda wheezed, “Hey Hajime, toss me the water.”

Hajime did. Souda caught it and immediately started to chug. “Thanks.”

“No problem…” Hajime muttered.

Pekoyama moved a bit closer, “How are you feeling now? You know it’s fine that you told us.”

Hajime winced. He… was trying to forget that. The look Saionji gave him… he shuddered and pushed it away. Pekoyama was right… they were only getting frustrated with the truth hidden. Still… he felt like he had called Saionji out on a secret she should have shared. Another stab hit his heart. Hajime shoved it deeper.

“Yeah… right.” He stood up, “I’ll… go now. Thank you, Peko.”

“You’re welcome Hajime.” She replied, “Have a good evening.”

Komaeda was waiting for him outside of Kuzuryuu’s house. Hajime’s mouth twitched and he walked up. Komaeda immediately grabbed his hand.

“Sorry… you didn’t have to wait.” Hajime muttered.

“It’s fine. I occupied myself.” Komaeda said, “Besides I drove. I didn’t want to be rude and leave you without a ride.”

“Thank you.” Hajime leaned into him, “Let’s… go home.”

“Right.”

Hajime entered his house with Komaeda in tow. Flopping down onto the couch, Hajime let Komaeda pull him closer, so they were snuggling. Grabbing the blanket Hajime had over the couch, Komaeda wrapped it around themselves.

“It’s fine.” Komaeda softly said, “Honesty is the best, right?”

A small laugh escaped Hajime’s throat, “Right. Honesty. I just… I couldn’t help it. They have been so cryptic… once I figured it out I just… blurted it.”
“Don’t worry too much over it now.” Komaeda firmly said, “It’s done. You can focus on apologies and fixing it later. For now, just relax.”

It hurt him a bit to know Komaeda was right. His guilt wasn’t going to change anything. Pushing it away for just the moment, Hajime curled into Komaeda, loving the heat.

Chapter End Notes

Chocolate Orange: Not a real note... I just want to say I love chocolate orange things.

823 yen: I looked up minimum wage in Japan and as of 2017 this is the minimum wage. 823 yen is around 9.40 Canadian and 7.20 USD (according to Google currency converter).

Two week notice: I got no clue if they do this in Japan, but in Canada if you want to quit a regular job, they usually ask a minimum of two weeks notice. Some work places can vary based on what kind of job it is.

Cash: Japan is still largely a cash-based society. Yes, they have credit cards (and debit too I think?) but not many places accept them. Mainly tourist areas and large companies do only.

Mitarai/ Impostor: As stated in my beginning note, I decided they are using Mitarai's name.

They/Them: Also stated up top, I use gender neutral pronouns for The Impostor

Friends with Mikan: I thought it was so cute, seeing their friendship in DR 3 that I had to add it in

Exhibit: Based on an exhibit I saw years ago. The artist's theme was all about things looking nice from a far and then up close horrifying. It stuck with me and the sculpture is actually based on one I saw at the gallery. I still shudder when I think of the teeth in the cake...

Nagito-kun: If you're old and sort of know the person, it's common to call them by their first name and add an endearment. It's not usually seen as rude when you're an older person.
Hello!!!

Okay. Third chapter done. I would have finished earlier, but I got serious in playing Pokemon Moon (finally). It was a Christmas gift from two of my friends and I have been slowly playing through it until recently when I just sat at my computer, word document open, playing Pokemon. (Sorry!!!)

I hope you enjoy this chapter. I had a lot of fun writing it. I'm excited for the next part. I hope everyone enjoys it! Thank you for the kudos and comments. They are lovely and always make my day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Carefully Hajime opened his sketchbook, pushing it to the side so he didn’t spill anything on it. Chewing on his rice, Hajime flipped through the pages, fingers dancing at the worn edges. Slowly he turned until he hit the page he wanted. Moving a bit closer, Hajime examined it.

He had drawn Saionji, eyes wide, as a figure in the dark held a knife to her throat. Hajime lightly touched the knife and trailed a bit down. He had drawn blood and although the blood wasn’t coloured, the picture was still gruesome. The shadowed figure made it feel impersonal, mysterious, but Hajime’s brain started to impose Tsumiki’s face, or tried to. He frowned heavily and couldn’t render the image perfectly. Tsumiki? All he could see was her tear stained face as she was belittled by the customer and her former work place. Yet she was the killer, according to Saionji and Koizumi.

Picking up his bowl of miso soup, Hajime sipped it and reached for his other sketchbook, the newer one. Flipping it open with one hand he stopped on the crime scene sketch.

Seeing Saionji plastered to the pillar made Hajime’s stomach slightly flip flop. Tsumiki didn’t just slit her throat, she also potentially killed someone else. Hajime looked at the body hanging off the baton lighting, the tote bag over the head. He had no proof that Tsumiki killed them, but the possibility was high.

Hajime set his miso soup down and flipped his book shut. Whatever the case, if Tsumiki did kill two people, why two? And why Saionji? Hajime finished his soup and sighed. They had no idea to the motive and asking Saionji about the circumstances was not going to happen. Even if he saw her, the chances of her answering were slim. Groaning Hajime finished his breakfast. Worrying about it with no leads or clues wasn’t going to help him, even if he wished it did.

~

The moment he walked in Hajime tried to not let his heart drop, but it did. The missing spaces at the table stood out like a swollen thumb. He shouldn’t feel discouraged when he already foresaw the possibility that Saionji and Koizumi wouldn’t show up at the diner.

“Can I get you anything?” Owari asked, standing up, “It’s a slow day so they won’t mind me serving
ourselves.”

“Uh… just… coffee…” Hajime muttered.

“Okay. Anything else?” She addressed the table.

Orders came and Owari bounced off, with her she took a bit of the buoyancy that tried to stop them from sinking into the reminder that Saionji and Koizumi were avoiding them, or specifically him.

“Don’t worry about it.” Komaeda gently said beside him, “They’ll come eventually.”

“Eventually…” Hajime muttered feeling like it was the keyword.

~

Hajime’s professor had moved onto the syllabus, discussing assignments. Opening the paper, he tried to follow the plan laid out, follow the percentages for grades and general outlines for handing stuff in…

But all Hajime could see was Saionji’s death. It danced in his mind, slowly flickering through, like a waltz. He could feel the tension in his muscles, the ache across his throat as a knife ran across. Hajime wanted to press his hand to his throat, to make sure it was intact. Did she die slowly? Or did she die quickly? Was she still clinging to life as her body was tied up to the pillar? Hajime winced as the thought crossed his mind. He didn’t want to dwell on it, but he hoped, at least, it was quick.

His mind then flashed to Saionji’s face when he spilled who killed her. The wide eyes, the white-hot flash of anger across her face before she exited the room… Hajime felt his stomach twist and he pushed the thoughts away. Turning his gaze to his professor, Hajime tried to listen, even though the thoughts kept pushing as the seams, wanting to burst forward.

~

He tried to not audibly sigh when once again Saionji and Koizumi weren’t there, but Hajime let out one as he sat down. Komaeda immediately grabbed his hand and squeezed it lightly, a small smile dancing across his face.

“This is bull…” Kuzuryuu muttered a bit loudly.

Sonia coughed in response and stood up, a waning smile on her face, “Shall I grab the snacks then?” Her voice was a bit loud.

“Right! Let me help!” Souda stood up.

The two of them shuffled out of the room, Souda nearly forgetting to shut the door.

~

“Here.” Komaeda pushed his drink over and sat down.

Hajime accepted it, wrapping his hands around the mug. The smell of chocolate waffled up and he blinked, staring down at his mug. The drink was dark and heavy with a small glop of whipped cream floating in the middle. On top of the whipped cream was some dark chocolate sprinkles.

“It’s the special.” Komaeda offered, “Dark Vanilla hot chocolate. I thought you needed something a bit special for today.”
“Thank you.” Hajime sipped the drink. It wasn’t overly sweet and the vanilla hit his throat softly after, “This is lovely.”

“You’ve been a bit silent during our last meetings.” Komaeda ventured, sipping his own drink, “Are you still worried about Saionji and Koizumi? I don’t think you need to beat yourself over telling us about Tsumiki.”

Hajime felt his face warm. “It… it isn’t that… I mean I do feel a little bad, but… I can’t help but think about the dream…”

“The dream?” Komaeda prompted.

“Yes… I just wish I knew all the details.” Hajime carefully said, glancing around. No one was sitting by them, but it was best to be safe, “I also wish I knew who the other person was…”

Komaeda hummed and picked up his mug, “It’s strange that there were two people… so far there has only been one, correct?”

“Yeah…” Hajime confirmed.

“I see…” Komaeda sipped his drink, “By the way, I kept meaning to ask you, but I kept forgetting… do you think I can look through your sketchbooks properly?”

“My… sketchbooks?” Hajime felt a blush start to dance across the bridge of his nose. He couldn’t mean… all of them… right?

Komaeda’s eyes widened and he shook his head, “I don’t mean… I mean I’ve seen that sketchbook enough… I mean the other one… the one with the other dreams.”

“Right.” Hajime took a deep breath, “Sure you can look at them.”

“Thank you. I was just thinking… maybe if I look through the books I’ll remember… more.”

Hajime smiled and drank more of his hot chocolate, “I’ll make a note and bring them to you the next time we meet.”

~

It was too early for his phone to be going off. Hajime groaned, rolled over, and with a long yawn fumbled with his phone. His eyes refused to cooperate and the screen was blurry. His fingers fumbled with hitting the answer button and the loud ringing buzzed in his ears even after he finally stopped it.

“Mmm?” Hajime couldn’t say words.

There was a shuffle of static in the background, followed by a voice, which was intelligible. Slowly Hajime tried to force his brain to piece everything together. Was… this a wrong number call? Or a prank?

“… Fuyuhiko…” Pekoyama’s voice drifted into his ear.

Oh… it wasn’t a prank… or wrong number. Hajime felt a hot rush of disappointment hit him.

“What?” The word came out garbled, but Hajime could care less.

“I said, shut up Peko. I can do what I want!” There was a rustling of fabric, “And get off me! Don’t you… I’m fine.”
What… was going on?

“Hey Hajime?” Kuzuryuu’s voice clearly rang into his ear, “How are things?”

Hajime’s brain slowly processed the words… why was Kuzuryuu phoning him with pleasantries?
“I’m… it’s too early…”

“Yeah, yeah say… can you come over?” Kuzuryuu asked, “My eye is acting up again. It’s annoying. I think it needs to be checked.”

The words pushed a hole in the sleep fog that wrapped around Hajime’s brain. He slowly sat up and blinked, “What?”

“You heard me…” Kuzuryuu sighed and groaned, “What? Is it too early to be the Ultimate Doctor or what?”

Ultimate… what? Hajime opened his mouth, but there was rustling again, followed by Pekoyama’s voice, urgent and soft.

“We’re going to the hospital.” Hajime managed to make out.

“Hospital?” Kuzuryuu asked, his voice raising, “Why? Will we see Hajime there?”

Silence filled the line before Pekoyama’s voice rang clearly, “Yes. We’ll see Hajime there.”

The call cut. Hajime blinked and wanted to flop back down into bed, but the conversation ran in his mind. Kuzuryuu was complaining about his eye… this was the second time. And what did he mean when he said… Ultimate Doctor?

His phone rang again. Hajime answered. “Yes?”

“Sorry Hajime.” Pekoyama’s voice was low, “Fuyuhiko had… a nightmare… he was thrashing about and then he woke up, no sign of stress and starting going on about not being able to see out of his eye and asked where you were…”

“It’s fine…” Hajime yawned.

“That’s not all…” Pekoyama paused, “I’m afraid I have to ask you to come to the hospital. I only got him to agree because I said you’d be there.”

“… are you kidding?” Hajime groaned.

“Please Hajime. I’m sorry.”

Hajime looked at his bed, his warm, comfortable bed, and sighed. It… would have to be sacrificed. “Ok. Fine.”

“I’ll buy you coffee.” Pekoyama promised.

~

The waiting room was mainly empty. A few people sat, eyes drooping, in the hard-plastic chairs along the wall, while a single receptionist sat behind a computer. A tall beige counter ran in front of her, with papers and fliers sitting neatly on the top.

Hajime spotted Pekoyama and Kuzuryuu, both sitting as two nurses stood, clipboards in hand,
talking. Kuzuryuu’s voice rang through the waiting room. Despite it not being loud, the relative emptiness of the place made it seem louder.

“For the third time, I’ve never had a problem with my eyes.” Kuzuryuu glared and turned to Pekoyama, “Where is Hajime? You told me he would be here.”

Hajime quickly walked over and waved. Pekoyama’s eyes flashed something warm. Hajime gave her a small nod and turned his attention to Kuzuryuu.

“Hey Fuyuhiko.”

“Finally, you’re here.” Kuzuryuu stood up, “It’s about time Hajime. These… people are making a fuss about my vision. Tell them it’s fine.”

Uh… what? Hajime stared. Kuzuryuu’s eyes looked fine… but there was something in them, something almost dark and swirly. He wanted to look longer, but it wasn’t the time.

“I’m sorry, may I ask who you are?” One of the nurses asked.

Hajime swallowed, “I’m…”

“He’s Family.” Kuzuryuu scowled, cutting in.

“Uh… that.” Hajime stammered, “Anyways… Fuyuhiko’s vision is fine… but I think you should get that looked at just to be sure.” He added, looking at Kuzuryuu.

“Okay. If you say so Hajime.”

Him? Hajime stared. Why was Kuzuryuu acting like he oversaw his health and wellbeing? Swallowing he looked at he nurses, who gave raised eyebrows. Silently Hajime nudged his head, hoping they would realize this was the best opportunity to get things done.

It worked. The nurse handed him the clipboard, “If you could…”

“Sure.” Hajime thickly swallowed and accepted the clipboard, setting his coffee down, “Fuyuhiko… if you could answer these questions…”

Kuzuryuu nodded.

“We’ll… be back in a moment.” The nurses left.

Great. Hajime began to read off the questions, filling things out, keeping an eye on him. Kuzuryuu still looked at him and talked, but there was something that seemed to glaze his eyes over, swirl like the finish to pottery. What was it? There was something wrong, but Hajime couldn’t put his finger on it.

He was just about finished the form when a nurse walked back up to them. It took Hajime a moment to recognize her. Tsumiki had chopped her hair so it evenly framed her face in a short cut that went a bit past her ears. Upon seeing them her eyes widened and she blushed a bit.

“Ah… hello…” Her voice softly came out.


“Yes, I’ve been good.” She replied, “Has the form been filled out?”
“Yes, here.” Hajime handed it to her.

“Thank you. I-if you could follow me Kuzuryuu-sama…”

“Tsumiki?” Kuzuryuu’s eyes widened and he turned to Hajime, “Are you sure Hajime? I mean I know Tsumiki has recovered in leaps and bounds from Despair, but you’re trusting her in the hospital?”

Hajime froze. Despair. That word again. The word was linked heavily with their dreams and Kuzuryuu was just… talking about it casually. Hajime watched as Tsumiki’s eyes widened and she cocked her head.

“Uh… pardon?” She politely asked.

Hajime cut in, “It’s fine Tsumiki-san… Fuyuhiko… let’s… follow her okay?”

Kuzuryuu blinked and for a moment Hajime could hear Kuzuryuu arguing with him. It sent his heart bouncing in his rib cage. He wouldn’t say anything more… right? Maybe Tsumiki would see it as nothing…

“Okay Hajime. If you say so.” Kuzuryuu stood up.

Hajime felt the rush of oxygen hit his blood stream so fast it was almost dizzying. Tsumiki lead them down the hall, towards a room that looked like a basic check-up room.

“If you could go inside…” Tsumiki said to Kuzuryuu, “And… I’m sorry but you’re not family or…” She bit her lip and looked at Pekoyama.

“It’s fine. We’ll wait here.” Pekoyama easily said.

Kuzuryuu however, turned around, “Hajime, you aren’t coming in?” His tone was painted in confusion.

“Oh… yeah…” Hajime scrambled, feeling his heart start a slow bounce again. Why was Kuzuryuu thinking he was qualified for this? “I think it best if we let Tsumiki-san handle this…”

Crap. Kuzuryuu’s eyes narrowed. Hajime barely had time to think when the gaze dropped and Kuzuryuu shrugged, “Fine. I get it. You want a break tonight. It’s fine.” He then shot a look to Tsumiki, “I’m trusting you…”

She squeaked, “Yes… the doctor will be around shortly…” She ushered him inside and shut the door before scrambling away.

Now that she was gone Hajime stepped away from the door, giving space by walking a bit down the hallway. Pekoyama silently followed him.

“What did Fuyuhiko mean by Tsumiki recovering from Despair?” Hajime asked, leaning against the wall.

Pekoyama stared at the door where Kuzuryuu was and furrowed her brow, “I don’t know… but we’re lucky Tsumiki didn’t question it further.”

“Yeah… we are…” Hajime muttered, “Hey, do you know what Fuyuhiko dreamed of?”

“He just kept muttering about his eye aching.” Pekoyama replied, “I’m sorry he kept shifting in and out… I could barely get any answers. It wasn’t until you showed up that he started to talk. He’s…”
acting strange…” Pekoyama concluded.

Right on point as usual. “Yes… he could just be out of it… it’s early…”

“It’s never been like this.” Pekoyama shook her head, “Fuyuhiko has never been like this after a dream… it’s almost like he’s not quite himself.”

Not quite himself? Hajime shuddered at the truth. “Why did he think I was the one to help him? And why did he call me the Ultimate Doctor?”

“It may have something to do with his dream?” Pekoyama offered, “Though it’s troubling to think he’s not himself after dreaming.”

Not himself after dreaming? Hajime didn’t want to think that. Their dreams were memories, yes, but they shouldn’t be directly influencing their behaviour… right? Something small dug into his brain, latching on, slowly spreading the poison of worry.

“I’m sorry it’s too early to draw conclusions. We should wait until we can ask Fuyuhiko questions.” Pekoyama softly said.

“Right.” Hajime replied, ignoring the icy fingers of panic trying to grasp onto him.

~

Hajime didn’t know how much time passed. He saw the doctor head into the room, followed by Tsumiki, but without the coffee Pekoyama bought him his eyes began to shut and his brain slowly tried to wiggle into sleep mode. Desperately his body clawed at the idea of falling asleep, but he couldn’t do that in the middle of the hospital. Instead Hajime pulled his phone out and began to scroll through it. Beside him Pekoyama stood tall, like a sentinel in the night.

At least another five minutes went by before the door opened. Pekoyama twitched slightly, alerting Hajime. He pocketed his phone and watched as Kuzuryuu walked out of the room along with the doctor and Tsumiki. Kuzuryuu bowed to the doctor before walking up to them. Hajime stared. There… was something different about Kuzuryuu… like a puzzle piece had slotted back into place.

“Hajime?” Kuzuryuu’s tone lifted at the end, “What are you doing here?”

What? Hajime stared, “Uh… you asked me to be?”

“I did?” Kuzuryuu frowned, “Sorry everything is a bit of a blur… thank you for coming.” He dug into his pocket before sighing, “What time is it?”

Hajime and Pekoyama both scrambled to answer. Kuzuryuu scowled and winced, “Ugh that early? Sorry Hajime…”

“It’s fine…”

“Anyways they say my eye is good.” Kuzuryuu reported, “I don’t really remember much, but I guess I claimed I couldn’t see out of it again?”

“Yes.” Pekoyama replied, “As soon as you woke up.”

It was meant to be informal, but Hajime felt his brain derail as her words hit him. As soon as he… oh… Hajime felt a blush form. Of course, they were… it felt as obvious as the sun rising in the morning. But to hear confirmation… in person…
“Thank you, Peko, Hajime.” Kuzuryuu repeated, “Here let me drive you home. I’ll get someone to pick your car up… again.”

Hajime turned his head and looked at Pekoyama. She gave the barest of shrugs and followed Kuzuryuu down the hall. Hajime followed, feeling his stomach twist. Kuzuryuu… didn’t remember anything? He stared at the back of Kuzuryuu’s head. Questions spiralled in his mind. There would be a time for him to ask, but fatigue started to mix in and Hajime opted to shove the questions aside for later.

~

“You were in the hospital again?” Souda burst out the moment he walked into the room.

“Yes, yes.” Kuzuryuu nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell us earlier?” Souda continued.

“We were all too tired.” Pekoyama replied, “And we didn’t want to raise the alarm only to fall asleep when questions were asked.”

Souda frowned, but sat down. Sonia timidly stepped in, followed by Owari, and then Komaeda. All three of them sat down, Komaeda brushing his hand as he settled in. Hajime felt a smile fill his face before staring at the entrance. No sign of Saionji or Koizumi. Hajime felt his heart drop a bit. There were so many questions, all unanswered and the uncertainty was eating at him.

“I see Saionji and Koizumi aren’t coming.” Kuzuryuu scoffed, “Let’s start. I woke up yesterday early and couldn’t see out of my eye. Peko took me to the hospital where Hajime met us.”

“Hajime did?” Souda looked at him.

“He phoned me asking for me to come.” Hajime added.

“I don’t really remember much.” Kuzuryuu continued, “I just know everything was ok. Oh, and we saw Tsumiki again.”

Sonia raised her hand, “May I ask what you dreamed of?”

Kuzuryuu’s mouth bent a bit, “I… don’t really remember. I just know my eye hurt and then my vision blurred. I then saw Hajime, though it was blurry. The next thing I remember I’m in the hospital and the doctor is checking my vision.”


“Fuyuhiko… was acting a bit strange.” Pekoyama easily replied, “He insisted Hajime come to the hospital. On the way, he kept nodding off to sleep and awake. When we arrived at the hospital, he didn’t answer the staff. It was only until Hajime came that he did.”

“Also…” Hajime softly said, “Fuyuhiko acted like I oversee his health… called me the Ultimate Doctor… and then he said something strange to Tsumiki.”

“I… did what?” Kuzuryuu’s face paled.

“You asked me if it was okay to trust her… and something about her recovering from despair.”

“Despair…” Kuzuryuu breathed, “What does that mean? It sounds like I thought it was a state or illness…”
“I was called that in one of my dreams too.” Owari added, “Someone called me Ultimate Despair… and now you dreamed that as well?”

Right. Hajime felt his brain spark. How did he forget that? Owari was called Ultimate Despair in a dream where she was beating someone up in an alleyway. Now Kuzuryuu called Tsumiki despair too… was that connected to all of them? Plus… the dream he had… the boy with the long hair… he world was in shambled. Could that possibly be tied into the phrase Ultimate Despair? He opened his mouth, but the sound of the door sliding open violently filled the room.

Koizumi stood there, along with Saionji, who poked her head out to stare only to duck away. A pink dusted across her cheeks as she folded her arms across her chest, turning away a bit. Silence thickly trickled into the room. Hajime blinked. They… came? The questions he had been holding, as well as the apology started to push through his mouth, fighting over which was first.

“See?” Saionji finally said, “I told you he’d be fine.”

“You made it.” Owari grinned.

“It’s nice to see you.” Sonia added, “Please sit…”

“Nice of you to show up.” Kuzuryuu cut Sonia off, coldly looking at them.

They both flinched, but Koizumi walked in without dropping her gaze. Sitting down beside Owari, she accepted the tea Sonia poured. Saionji sat beside Koizumi. Souda coughed and turned to Kuzuryuu, who was still giving a cold look. Hajime looked back and forth, wondering if it was fine to talk.

“We were just discussing what happened to Kuzuryuu.” Komaeda broke the silence seamlessly.

“Yes…” Pekoyama followed Komaeda’s trail, “The term Despair has come up in relation to Owari and now Tsumiki. We need to see if there is a connection.”

Saionji scoffed, “Figures…” She muttered under her breath.

Kuzuryuu caught that. His eyes flashed and he opened his mouth, “Okay. We get it. You don’t like Tsumiki. She slit your throat in our dreams. It’s in the past. Done. Koizumi didn’t have nearly as big of a problem with Peko, so what’s your deal?”

Great. Hajime winced as Saionji’s mouth dropped, her face slowly turning red. Her brow furrowed and she started to stand up, but Koizumi immediately latched onto her wrist, dragging her down.

“We talked about this Hiyoko…”

“I know…” Saionji hissed, “But… it’s different for Mahiru…”

“Oh?” Kuzuryuu raised an eyebrow, “Care to explain?”

Saionji shot a glare. Koizumi started to rub circles on her hand, “Look it’s just… with Pekoyama… she did it for you. She had the hope that it would save you from… whatever situation this Neo World Program put us in. I don’t think you wanted me dead… and if the situation played differently… I think she wouldn’t have killed me…”

Koizumi swallowed, “But Tsumiki… Hiyoko told me in her dream she saw her preparing for a murder… she had rope in her hands.”
Hajime gaped. Rope… that meant… “So, wait she was preparing for a murder with rope? But that means… she killed the person who was hanging from the lights?”

“And… that also means Saionji wasn’t the intended victim.” Pekoyama added.

“She killed Saionji so there wouldn’t be a witness.” Komaeda confirmed, “This means… unlike Pekoyama who killed in the hope to save Kuzuryuu from something… Tsumiki killed Saionji simply because she was at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“So, you’re upset at Tsumiki because she killed you only to cover the actual murder she was planning?” Kuzuryuu summed.

Saionji nodded, “And… she meticulously planned whoever she intended to murder. Unlike Mahiru’s death… this one was planned and thought out before hand.”

Planned and thought out? Hajime bit his lip and looked over at Komaeda carefully. He had informed them of a botched plan in another dream… but the difference here was Tsumiki succeeding. A shiver ran up his spine. The information changed how he saw the dream and Hajime couldn’t help but wonder what drove Tsumiki to kill was really the same reason Pekoyama killed Mahiru.

“Thanks for telling us.” Sonia gently said, “However, we do need to make a choice. What shall we do about Tsumiki-san? We can’t keep going to the hospital to see her.”

“… Can’t we just leave her alone?” Saionji muttered.

“Sonia is right.” Souda agreed, “We can’t base Tsumiki off our dreams. That’s not who she is.” He gave a small wink to Hajime.

Hajime blushed as his words for Komaeda were recycled. “Yeah… I agree with Kazuichi.”

“He has a point.” Pekoyama nodded, “We can at least try. If she doesn’t remember anything we don’t need to push it.”

“As if we needed to argue over if we are doing something about her or not.” Kuzuryuu grumbled.

Pekoyama lightly elbowed him and turned to Koizumi and Saionji, “Is this okay?”

“…Whatever…” Saionji turned, “Can’t stop you…”

Koizumi sighed and continued to rub Saionji’s hand, “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to try…”

~

As soon as the meeting was over, Saionji and Koizumi practically bolted from the room. Hajime gasped and ran after them, nearly tripping over Komaeda as he did so. The halls twisted and he made his way to the front.

“Koizumi, Saionji.” Hajime called out.

The two of them turned, almost half way out the door. “Yes?” Koizumi asked.

“I… I just wanted to apologize properly for blurring out… you know…”

Saionji scoffed, “It’s fine now. I guess. I can’t fix that.”

They left and Hajime rubbed his head. That went… better than he expected. The apology still felt a
bit weak, but how else could he word the phrase “sorry I told everyone who killed you in a dream”? “How did your apology go?”

Hajime turned. Komaeda was walking up, smiling gently. “It… went well.” Hajime answered, “I didn’t get yelled at so that’s a bonus.” “I’m glad.” Komaeda smiled, “Say, are you busy now?” “No?” “Do you mind then…” Komaeda bit his lip, “If I come over to see the sketchbooks?” Oh… crap. Hajime felt his face heat, “I forgot sorry…” “It’s fine.” Komaeda assured, “It’s why I want to come over and see… if you don’t mind.” “Ah it’s good.” Hajime scrambled, “You can come over now.” “Now?” Komaeda’s eyes widened before he smiled, “Okay. I’ll see you at your place.”

Komaeda sat on his couch, a cup of tea on the table as he flipped through the sketchbook. Hajime leaned closer, trying to not touch Komaeda and distract him. Komaeda stopped flipping the pages and Hajime froze, slowly leaning away. Komaeda sighed and his arm snaked out, wrapping around Hajime’s waist. Hajime felt a high blush fill his cheeks as Komaeda pulled him closer, their body heat mingling. “You can be close to me.” Komaeda huffed. “I… didn’t want to distract you.” “You distract me either way.” Komaeda muttered, “Might as well be close to me then.” Hajime blushed. Komaeda returned to flipping through the sketchbook, “Hey what’s this?” “That?” Hajime leaned closer and saw the note on the top, ‘Oh… that’s the Russian Roulette drawing.’ “Russian Roulette?” Komaeda asked, “I see no gun?” “Ah… it’s because you were just telling me about it. In the dream, you told me you played it with 5/6 bullets.” Hajime clarified. “I did what?” Komaeda turned his head a bit. “You survived…” Hajime muttered, “I just dreamed it. I got no clue why you did that.” “… I see…” Komaeda flipped the page, “It sounds like I got very lucky.”

Komaeda’s name flashed across his screen. Hajime set his glass down and hit the answer button, putting Komaeda on speaker, and returned to his breakfast.
“Hello?”

“Hey... Hinata... I... I dreamed something...” Komaeda’s voice came out softly, “I...” He laughed, “It’s funny after we just talked about Tsumiki...”

Hajime felt his fork clatter against the plate. He winced at the sound, but felt his brain click what Komaeda might have dreamed, “Oh?”

“Hinata...” Komaeda sighed, “I figured you knew. You have a sketch in your book with us in the Trial room and my smile looked a bit too wide.”

“I’m sorry...” Hajime weakly said.

“It’s fine...” Komaeda continued, “I wouldn’t have told me either. Anyways... I was gleefully admitting to planning a murder. I had everything set up... but it went array and next thing I knew the body under the table wasn’t killed by me.”

The body under the table. Hajime winced. “Do you know who died?”

“No... sorry.” Komaeda answered, “But I do know why my plan failed.”

“Oh?” Hajime blinked.

“A pair of night vision goggles.” Komaeda clarified, “Somehow those were critical in stopping me.”

Hajime stood up and went to his counter, writing a note down quickly, “Anything else?”

“No. Sorry.” Komaeda replied. “Anyways... I have another reason for phoning you.”

“You do?” Hajime blushed, “Well?”

“The improv group we saw that one time has started again. They’re doing their first show for the year on Friday. Want to see it with me?”

The dream details flew out of Hajime’s mind, replaced by a fluttering. He smiled widely. A date. It was a bit pathetic that simply asking him out caused his heart to flutter, but Hajime didn’t care.

“I’d love to.”

~

Another year... another assignment. Hajime stared at the first project’s theme... movement... What was he going to do? Tapping his pencil against his table, Hajime glanced at his sketchbook. His final project from the last year popped in his head and Hajime sighed. Maybe this time he could do a project and not make it a dream. He bit his lip and started to brainstorm.

~

The theater was the same one as last time. Hajime walked, Komaeda’s hand snugly fit in his. Memories surfaced and Hajime smiled when he remembered walking to his car under Komaeda’s umbrella.

Paying the admission himself, Hajime let Komaeda lead them into the theater as he tried to pocket his wallet while doing so. Picking a seat, Hajime stared at the theater. There were some groups on the side of the stage, chatting with each other. Some people were already there, chatting with each other as they sat down.
Pulling his phone out, Hajime made sure to turn it to silent. Komaeda grinned and leaned over.

“So, they’re doing a rotation of three groups.” He explained, “Everyone has two skits, about ten minutes per skit.”

“Sounds like fun.” Hajime pocketed his phone. “Do you know anyone in the groups?”

“No, I don’t.” Komaeda replied, “I just thought it worked so well in our last date, we’d do this again.”

Hajime blushed and turned his head. “Right…”

“You’re so cute.” Komaeda laughed, “It’s rather sweet.”

Focusing his attention on the groups, Hajime watched as they bustled around, checking the lighting, the microphones… a person walked behind the stage and called out to someone. Hajime was about to turn his head when he saw him.

Gaping Hajime leaned closer. The hair… it was the same… with the white stripe down the one part… and the jacket… dark and heavy… he even had the piercing in his ear. He lifted his arm and Hajime saw bandaged wrapped around one, heavy and thick. He disappeared a moment later, but Hajime followed his movement with his eyes… that was… Sonia’s guy…

“Hinata?” Komaeda tugged his arm, “You’re practically out of your seat.”

“Ah…” Hajime slid back into the seat, “I… that guy… the one with the dark clothes.”

“Do you know him?” Komaeda asked.

“Not really… just… Sonia asked me to draw him… a long time ago…”

Komaeda blinked before his eyes widened, “He’s… a part of our dreams too?”

Hajime nodded, “I think… I should text Sonia…”

~

Sonia’s eyes widened and her hands flew to her mouth. A sparking filled her gaze as she looked down, her mouth twitching into a smile and a frown at the same time. She leaned into the booth and Hajime saw her face turn pink as stammering started to escape her lips.

“You… saw him…” Her voice cracked, “Did you get his name?”

“Sorry… no…” Hajime replied, “But we do know that his group will be performing in another two weeks at the same place.”

“When and where?” Sonia’s voice escaped high and breathy, “If… you don’t mind telling me…”

“No, we don’t.” Komaeda gently said, “Here.” He passed a flyer to her.

Sonia snatched the flyer up and looked at if for a moment before clutching it to her chest, “Did you tell the others?”

“No, not yet.” Hajime answered, “I thought you’d want to be the first one to hear.”

“Could you…” Sonia bit her lip, “This is so selfish, but…Not tell them for a bit? If you do everyone
will want to investigate it and I… want to see him on my own…”

Her request hit Hajime over the head. Was that a wise choice? Of course, they knew where he’d be and now that they knew what he was doing it would probably be easy to find out more. But… to hold information back… his mind flashed to Komaeda and Hajime winced. Kuzuryuu was more than upset and…

“I don’t know if keeping it secret is the best idea.” Komaeda gently said, speaking Hajime’s thoughts, “However, why don’t we compromise? We’ll tell everyone, but we promise none of us will go with you to the Improv unless you want us there.”

Sonia’s eyes widened and she looked down, the red staining her cheeks darker, “You’re… right I was selfish… and rude to think you wouldn’t honour my wishes…”

“It’s fine Sonia.” Hajime gently said. “I… understand how you feel…”

He blushed and beside him Hajime felt Komaeda chuckle. Hajime lightly kicked him under the table. Komaeda coughed, but Hajime knew he was silently laughing.

“Thank you so much.” Sonia looked up. Her face was still red, but she was smiling, “I promise if anything happens, I’ll let you know.”

~

“You promised what?” Kuzuryuu asked.

Pekoyama gave a look. Kuzuryuu coughed, “I mean, we’re more than happy to respect Sonia’s wishes, it’s just… this is the second person to be connected to our dreams… we should… find out more.”

“He’s in the Improv club.” Komaeda offered, “And we know what he looks like. I’m sure with this information we can find things out.”

“He’s right.” Koizumi rolled her eyes, “This is a lot to work with. I can keep an eye out at school. Sooner or later all art students will find each other.”

Hajime nodded, “We’ll find out about him and respect Sonia’s wish.”

Chapter End Notes

Miso Soup: Miso soup is so thin of a soup that usually in Japan you just drink it and don’t use a spoon.

Dark Chocolate: Not an actual note I just want to say dark chocolate is amazing.

Coffee in a bottle: Japan's vending machines can dispense hot and cold drinks (in the same one). Coffee in vending machines comes in a short metal-like bottle... that I'm not 100% sure what it is entirely made of. Anyways, you can also purchase this kind of coffee at convenience stores, where it will also be hot. The type of coffee can range from latte like coffee to just black coffee.

Hospital: In Japan, while they do have separate clinics, a lot of the clinics are attached
to, or close to a hospital. Hence, why a lot of the time in Japan if you need to see a
doctor for something basic, they still say "go to the hospital".

Clipboard: Now, I'm just basing this off my father's experiences at the hospital, but if it's
not too serious, ie: just a check up or screening of something, they did the paperwork
before anything else (ie: any tests that need to be done, seeing someone etc). I'm sticking
to this and not worrying too much about accuracy (ie: if Japan does it differently or not).

Kuzuryuu-sama: Again, in any interaction where you're a customer, the workers usually
add the -sama honorific. It's just a way to be polite and considered a part of customer
service.

Improv Group: I'm basing this off of something one of my former roommates took me
and other former roommate to. There were multiple groups, all doing a ten to fifteen
minute skit. It was lovely because we got to experience multiple groups and their ideas.
Task: Meeting and Dinner

Chapter Notes

This took SO LONG for me to write. A big reason why is because of... mobile games... I admit... I finally got around to playing Mystic Messenger... as well as Plants VS. Zombies.. and then Fire Emblem Heroes came out... I've been a mess XD The other reason is because I was SO scared to write Gundham. Out of all the characters from SDR2, Gundham is definitely the hardest for me to write. I hope... I did okay...

Plot is moving slowly, but with so much to set up I kind of expected this. I still got plans to bring OTHER characters in. I know it's a bit ambitious of me and I'll definitely sob about regrets to myself later, but I think I can do it...

So, I hope you enjoy the chapter. I hope I wrote Gundham fine and I hope to see everyone in Chapter Five.

Thank you for all the comments and kudos. They always make me smile and feel happy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How Kuzuryuu even had a file room was beyond Hajime, but he wasn’t going to question it. Having a personal library in a house was already quite fancy, but a separate room for files and documents on people? It felt very old fashioned, but with hackers and technology as a possible failure having physical copies of things had benefits too.

Hajime focused his attention on the section Kuzuryuu told him to look at. He didn’t want to accidently see something, though, he was sure Kuzuryuu wouldn’t put him in that sort of danger, one had to be cautious.

Pulling out a thick manila file, Hajime opened it up. It was on the University's various clubs and groups. Flipping through the file (in alphabetical order none the less), he reached the Improve club’s. All the information was basic, to when it first formed, to the various members, up to the current ones. A few had pictures, but those were mainly for the captains of the groups. Hajime scanned the list of names, though without a picture or a name to go by, it was rather hard. Still, they could look up the people individually. Setting the file down on a pile of boxes, Hajime searched. Maybe Kuzuryuu had a separate file on the various clubs?

“Do you need help Hajime?” Pekoyama stepped in carefully.

“Still feels a bit stalker-ish.” Hajime replied, “I mean, I know there is a chance Sonia won’t get to talk to him, but…”

“There is a chance that Sonia will fail to make a connection with him.” Pekoyama calmly replied, “We also don’t have many dreams to reference. It’s just… nice to know the basics.”

Basics… like a name… Hajime focused. There was no point wondering if their work would amount to something. Pekoyama had a point; they couldn’t push everything onto Sonia.
Hajime turned and pointed to the file, “I found the one on the University’s clubs. Do you know if there is a separate one for the Improv Club?”

Peko pursed her lips, “I think so… we were categorized all the clubs when we first got to University… let me see…”

She stepped up and searched, pulling out various files, examining them. Hajime returned to his search, though he saw multiple files labelled “IKEBANA CLUB” and “IKEBANA CLUB MEMBERS”. A blush filled his face and Hajime couldn’t help but feel he saw something private. Turning his head, he knelt and looked at the files on the bottom. Nothing…

“I think I got something.” Pekoyama suddenly said, “It’s just for the Drama Department, but it’s a good start.”

“Okay.” Hajime craned his head over, “Let me finish looking here…”

His eye caught something. Sticking out of a book titled “Pet Shops” Hajime saw a piece of paper sticking out of it. Picking the book up, Hajime opened it and looked at the paper. It was a picture of a pet shop, the name of the place wasn’t in there, but what mattered was who was in the photo. It was a candid shot, with customers bustling around, workers working, but in the photo, was Sonia’s guy.

“Peko!” Hajime stood up, “I… I found him.”

“You did?” Pekoyama glanced over, “Let’s see.”

Hajime held the photo up. Pekoyama stared at it before gently turning his hand, looking under the photo. There was nothing. Hajime turned his hand back and stared. While it was clear he was a worker, there was no name tag on him. There was also no company logo on the uniform he was wearing. At least, on the front.

“Do you know where this is?”

“No… but I’m sure we can find out.” Pekoyama confidently said.

“Ok. I’ll check the records down here one last time.” Hajime set the file on top of the University Club one.

“Okay. I’ll start bringing files out.” Pekoyama said. “We can also see what Sonia gets when she tells us about the event.”

Hajime nodded. It was time to check one last time before getting to work. Doing a sweep of the shelves he only found a small file on the arts clubs. Grabbing it, Hajime exited the room, locating Pekoyama, sitting on the couch closest to the fireplace.

“I only found this.” Hajime waved the file. “I have to admit, I’m surprised Fuyuhiko’s Family has hard copies of things. Isn’t that dangerous?”

Pekoyama blinked before replying, “Many of these files were passed down in the Family before computers were invented.”

“Oh… okay…”

A moment passed before Hajime opened his mouth, “So if the files were ever compromised…?”

His question died as Pekoyama eyed the fireplace with a slow head turn. Hajime felt his face burn a
bit and he coughed, dropping the question.

“Let’s split the files up.” Pekoyama started calmly, “I’ll look through the University one. I’ll leave the Pet Shop to you.”

“Okay.” Hajime opened the file and began to search.

Words and words filled his mind, all business jargon. Maybe having Komaeda search would have been a good idea… Hajime flipped the pages, focusing on the pictures first. If they could get a name and a face… that would be ideal. Even if he saw the name, he’d have no way of connecting it. Hopefully Sonia would be able to help them fill in the blanks. Flipping through the book, Hajime was about to set it down, when he saw some pages at the end, filled mainly with candid shots, like a yearbook. Leafing through them he spotted a picture with Sonia’s guy. Opening the book a bit wider, Hajime lifted it to look closer. There was no name again, but he saw the store’s sign clearly, “Pet Metropolis.”

“Peko!” Hajime quickly showed her the page, “It’s not much, but I found the name of the shop.”

Pekoyama set her file down, “Good work.”

“But…” Hajime stared at the name, “It’s a big company… there are so many stores in the city.”

“We’ll have to start from where we know…” Pekoyama muttered, “He’s a student, so let’s check around the University first…”

Hajime pulled his phone out, “Got it.”

“I’ll keep searching through the University files.” Pekoyama said, “Maybe I’ll find a name. This would have been easier if we dreamt up the name.”

Dreamt the name… Hajime bit his lip and tried to think. His sketchbook surprisingly had very few dreams with Sonia’s guy. The only thing he had was a face, thanks to Sonia. It was odd; normally they had a few coherent scenes. This time… only Sonia saying she thought he killed someone. Hajime turned back to his search and made a mental note to look through his sketchbooks, just in case.

~

His old sketchbooks were thrown across his bed. Hajime sat, cross legged, flipping through the pages. Page after page… and nothing. Hajime rubbed his head. He only had sketches thanks to Sonia, all of them head and shoulder shots. In the corner was a note reading “killed someone?” in slightly smudged graphite. Groaning Hajime began to clean up, stuffing his sketchbooks back

Hajime tried to not let his heart sink. Turning his laptop on, Hajime got to work, re-organizing and continuing the list of store locations.

~

Sonia sat properly, hands folded on her lap. Hajime snuggled into Komaeda as he subconsciously moved over, making room on the couch. Immediately Owari swooped in and took the space. Koizumi, Saionji, and Souda were on the other couch. Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama sat across from them on chairs. Pekoyama held the notes she and Hajime had made. The pile was small, but they were taking anything they got. A name was a good start, but there were still many blank spaces. The most prominent one being the dreams. Hajime clutched his sketchbook as well as a long list of store locations.
“Let’s start, shall we?” Sonia broke their silence, “I went to the show yesterday. Afterwards I tried to talk with the various members…” She bit her lip, “I got a name. His name is… Gundham Tanaka.”

“Tanaka Gundham?” Saionji parroted, “Quite the first name… for someone with such a common last name.”

“That only makes it harder to search.” Koizumi mused, “Good thing we had other connections to him… speaking to those.” She pulled out a folded piece of paper, “I asked around on campus and convinced someone to give me the schedule for all performances and rehearsals.”

… Did Hajime want to know how she convinced them? Kuzuryuu gave a nod of approval, “I had people scout the theaters and give me information about potential locations. The University favours certain theaters. I made a list as well as the booking schedule for the next six months.”

Koizumi gave a low whistle, “We’ll have to compare our lists.”

“If I may continue,” Sonia gently butted in, “I got to talk to him briefly… mainly about the performances. He… didn’t give me any reaction upon seeing me.” Her voice dipped a bit.

Nothing, huh? Hajime held back a sigh. Again, it was hard to know. Tanaka was an actor… he could have hidden it from Sonia. There was no way to confirm immediately, so Hajime held the thought.

Pekoyama went next, “Hajime and I went through records for the University. I mainly got general information, but Hajime found something unexpected.”

Right. His turn, “I found this.” Hajime showed a photocopy of the picture, “It is of… Tanaka-san working at a store named Pet Metropolis. Of course, there are so many stores in the city… I’ve made a list of locations close to the University. I’m still working on the other locations…”

“Wait, Pet Metropolis?” Owari sat up and stared at the photo closely, “There’s a shop a couple blocks down the street from my work… many of the workers come to my diner when they’re on break or done work. Many of them are my regulars.”

The pool of information was a lot more than Hajime expected. They were slowly piecing together someone else from their dreams. Which left another concern…

“So, I was wondering.” Hajime spoke up, “Has anyone had any other dreams about Tanaka Gundham? I went through my sketchbooks and I only got one, where he admitted about killing someone.”

Everyone looked away with varying degrees of shuffling and mumbling. Hajime wished he didn’t have to ask, but it was necessary.

“No… sorry…” Komaeda thoughtfully muttered.

“Same here.” Pekoyama confirmed.

“…can I assume the same for everyone else?” Hajime asked, trying to not glance over at Sonia.

Silence. Hajime nodded, “Thanks.”

“If that’s all, then I think we’re done.” Kuzuryuu calmly said, “Any other questions or information?”

They sat in another moment of silence before Souda spoke.
“So… do we make a new plan to meet him?”

“Well…” Koizumi opened the paper, “The next performance isn’t until the end of the winter term. We can plan that later.”

“We could just find out which location he works at.” Saionji huffed.

Hajime groaned that meant… more work. The information he had bundled was only scratching the surface. There were a surprisingly many stores in the area and he could sense hours of planning. Plus, planning to appear for the performance…

“Uh… you know…” Sonia raised her hand, “We could just befriend Tanaka-san.”

The room rang with silence as everyone slowly turned to Sonia, who still had her hand in the air. Hajime felt her words smack him in the face and slowly register. Immediately he felt his face heat up. Beside him Hajime felt Komaeda move forward, humming a bit.

“Ah… that… would make our lives easier…” Komaeda muttered.

More silence filled the room. Sonia… had a point. There was no reason for them to sneak around. Sonia had already made her presence known to him. They at least knew Tanaka would be on campus.

Kuzuryuu swore before he spoke properly, “We’re idiots. You’re right we could just befriend him… we were going to do this the hard way…” He swore again and shook his head, “We’ll just have to plan to run into him again and hope it works.”

Right. A significantly easier plan. Hajime felt his heart beat faster. Another person and hopefully Tanaka would remember too.

“That’s all well and good,” Saionji huffed, “But you can’t just hang around the Drama building and hope to run into him. Shouldn’t we try to figure out his schedule or something?”

She had a point, but was researching more work than letting it fall to chance? Also, finding out someone’s schedule felt a little bit beyond basic information.

“We could just leave it to chance?” Komaeda mused, “Finding personal information like that is… like a stalker. That could back fire.”

Hajime winced. This time though, Tanaka would be right if he accused them of that.

Sonia spoke, “I think Komaeda is correct. We don’t want to break his trust in us… so let’s try chance first.”

~

Komaeda slipped beside him as they walked out, a warm, comforting presence. Hajime leaned closer and slipped his arm around Komaeda’s waist. Their body heat intermingled as they walked outside, a cool breeze hitting them. The day was slowly chipped away, leaving warm streaks in the sky.

“Sorry I couldn’t help you with the research.” Komaeda softly said.

“It’s fine.” Hajime replied, “Family business is important too.”

“Thanks for understanding.” Komaeda hummed before snuggling a bit closer, “Say, are you, busy tonight?”
Despite the many dates, they had been on, Hajime couldn’t stop his heart fluttering a bit. “No…”

“Would you like to come over to my place for dinner?” Komaeda asked, “My parents have been out for business this past week. I’d enjoy the company.”

His heart fluttered again, stronger. “Okay… I’d love that.”

“Great.” Komaeda leaned over and turned his head, pressing a kiss to the side of his face, “You can just follow my car back, okay?”

“Right.” Hajime pressed a return kiss, “But just in case, remind me of your address?”

“Okay.” Komaeda pulled his phone out. A moment later Hajime heard his phone ding, “Let’s go.”

Nodding Hajime kept his arm around Komaeda until they had to part for their vehicles.

~

Komaeda’s house was still large and massive. It loomed over Hajime and the twitch in his heart reminded him the last time he was here, things ended badly. A warm hand wrapped around his and Hajime looked up to see Komaeda smiling small.

“Don’t worry. It will be fine.”

Was he obvious? Hajime curled his fingers around Komaeda’s hand and walked with him inside. A man in a suit stood there, eyebrows raising ever so slightly at his appearance. Was… he the same man that greeted Hajime the first time?

“Welcome back Komaeda-san.”

Komaeda smiled, “Hello Haruto, I brought company over for dinner.”

The eyes slowly wandered over to Hajime, dead except for the barest hint of a frown on his face. Hajime blushed. He hadn’t considered earlier that maybe… someone heard them yelling when Komaeda confronted him. Suddenly Hajime felt a lump in his throat. He had no idea if Haruto had heard and if he had… how much…

“Very well.” Haruto calmly said, “If you will follow me…”

Taking his shoes off Hajime followed with Komaeda, hands still in each other’s as he was led around on the first floor. By passing the massive staircase in front, they wound around until they reached an open design kitchen. In the kitchen were a small army of people, all busy flying around. Komaeda cleared his throat and waved when they turned.

“Hey I’m home.” He greeted, “I brought company.”

“Welcome back.” They chorused.

Out of the group a tall woman emerged. Hajime tried to not stare, but her tattoos stood so prettily against her arms. They really were gorgeous, starting dark and growing to a gradient of colourful swirls.

“Welcome back Nagito. And hello to your guest.”

“Thank you, June.” Komaeda replied before pushing Hajime forward, “Go on.”
“Hello,” Hajime bowed, “I’m Hinata Hajime.”

She let out a warm laugh and bowed too, “I’m June Hart. No need for too many formalities here. We’re all family.” She reached out and rubbed Komaeda’s hair, “Typical of you to take your sweet time inviting your boy over.”

Hajime gaped and flushed hotly, turning to Komaeda, who was flushing equally as bright.

“J-June…”

“What?” She crossed her arms, “It’s the truth. Either way, it’s about time. He’s told me a few things about you Hinata.”

If it was possible, Komaeda’s face looked like steam was rising off it, “I… It was all good things… I promise…”

June gave a wink and turned around, “Dinner is almost ready.”

“Okay.” Komaeda pulled Hajime over to the right, “We’ll be sitting at the table.”

The table was in a separate room, with hardwood floors, a fireplace, and a few paintings on the wall. A rectangular table sat in the middle. The fireplace was lit, though dim, only casting a soft orange light in the room.

“This is nice.” Hajime sat down.

“It’s the family table.” Komaeda replied. “The guest one is a lot larger.”

“I like this.” Hajime concluded, staring at the walls, “It’s really nice, especially with a fireplace. Between you and Sonia I feel like I’ve seen a lot of wood fireplaces.”

“It’s my mother.” Komaeda elaborated, “She loves them. My father is always worried about housefires, but it’s been fine. This is the one we light usually when it gets cold. I can light one, you know.” Komaeda added, “June and Elaine… ah she didn’t introduce herself… anyways they taught me in high school. I pestered them for ages.”

“You’ve known them for a long time.” Hajime smiled.

“Yes…” Komaeda smiled, “June… Elaine… Haruto… most of the staff have been here since I was a child. My mother likes taking in people who want to work in public services hotels or restaurants. Even foreigners, like June.”

“Wow…” Hajime stared, “I mean… I know Fuyuhiko has things like that… but I’ve rarely seen…”

“Sorry…” Komaeda blushed, “I sound really… privileged…”?

“You’re not bragging.” Hajime replied, “It’s fine.”

Komaeda opened his mouth, but the sound of someone walking in cut him off. A man, just a bit older than Hajime, entered, carrying the food.

“June says she has to rework some of the main course because of your date.” The man told Komaeda with a wide smile.

“…you’re all really enjoying this, aren’t you?” Komaeda’s face started to burn red again.
“Enjoy your meal.” The man set some soup and salad in front of them before exiting.

Dinner was… amazing…the main course was fish that practically melted into his mouth… and then
dessert… Hajime picked up his glass of water and sipped before quickly glancing at his phone. It
was… later than he expected. He was still learning boundaries with Komaeda and his mind was
sensibly telling him that he should leave.

“This was nice.” Hajime softly said, “Though I think I should take my leave.”

Komaeda blinked and pulled his phone out, “You’re right… it’s late…” He paused before thickly
swallowing and looking up. Komaeda’s eyes darted and Hajime saw him clasp his hands together.

“But… I mean… you don’t have to leave… if you don’t want to.”

Hajime blinked, “That’s… kind, but I’d hate to overstay my welcome…”

“No, I mean…” Komaeda reached over to grasp his hand, but instead it fell to the table, “I mean…
stay the… night… if you want…”

Oh… Hajime’s face burned right up to his ears. The fluttering that was present when he first arrived
returned with vengeance. It clogged his heart and mind, leaving him speechless. Komaeda was
asking… what he thought he was asking… Hajime wanted to leap up in joy.

It was Komaeda’s sigh that broke his stupor. His hand was retreating. Crap. Hajime lunged forward
and grabbed his hand tightly.

“Yes.” Hajime blurted out before Komaeda could get the wrong idea. “Yes… I’d… love to.”

“Really?” Komaeda’s eyes were bright before he coughed, “I mean… good. It’s late anyways.”

Hajime held back a laugh and carefully leaned over, “I mean… good. It’s late anyways.”

Komaeda’s red cheeks looked so lovely up close, running all the way to his ears. Hajime didn’t
move and just stared, loving the flecks of blue and grey in Komaeda’s eyes. It was… as corny as it
felt to admit, breathtaking.

“We… don’t have to do anything you don’t want.” Hajime whispered, “I don’t want to look
pushy…”

Komaeda rolled his eyes and leaned forward, sealing their lips. An electric shock ran down Hajime’s
spine as their kiss deepened. He could taste the chocolate of dessert and a bit of ginger from the fish.
Komaeda lifted his arms and tangled them around Hajime’s shoulders, trying to desperately pull them
closer. Hajime tried to break the kiss when he felt the table awkwardly jab into his thighs. It didn’t
work. Komaeda fell over and his lips landed on Hajime’s jaw line, continuing to press kisses slowly
downward.

“K-Komaeda…”

“It’s Nagito.” Komaeda huffed finally pulling away, “And trust me. I’ll stop you if I don’t like it. I
trust you’ll do the same?”

Hajime barely had time to nod before Komaeda pulled him into another kiss.
Hungry… so hungry…

Hajime wobbled down the stairs and felt the sharp stabbing pain in his abdomen. It was timely, like it was on a clock. He could feel his body eating away at himself, trying desperately to have something to sustain his functions. The bright, garish colours of strawberry house danced across his eyes. It left him sick, down to his core. Everything about their environment was sickening: the colours, the lights, and the smells. Somehow, Hajime wasn’t sure if he was imagining it due to starvation or if it was actually there, he could smell strawberries.

A dizzy spell, one he was sadly growing accustomed to, hit him and he felt his footing shift. Sluggishly Hajime tried to grab onto something to break his fall. His fingers brushed against the wall as he fell, the sharp impact of the stairs hitting his back. Lying almost diagonally down the stairs, Hajime stared at the ceiling, at the strawberries dancing across. He closed his eyes and tried to stop the urge to throw up, despite having nothing in his stomach to throw up.

“How did Komaeda sound calm? Hajime slowly cracked his eyes open. Komaeda was leaning over him, much like their first encounter on the beach. Seeing the paleness of Komaeda’s skin and hair was only a minor reprieve from the strawberries.

“Go away…” Hajime’s voice slurred as he tried to bat Komaeda with his arm.

Komaeda grabbed his arm easily and turned it, pressing a kiss to the inside of his wrist. Hajime felt his skin tingle as Komaeda pulled his lips away, keeping Hajime’s arm captive.

“No need to feel embarrassed from falling.” Komaeda said with cheer, “It happens to everyone. Do you want a hand up?”

“No…” Hajime tried to pull his arm away, “I got this.”

Komaeda huffed, “Your pride is getting you no where Hinata-kun.”

With a surprising display of strength, Komaeda started to pull him up. Hajime swayed a bit and soon managed to use his other hand to balance himself upright. With a groan, Hajime forced his knees to bend, feeling like he was fighting with a metal beam. Komaeda through it all kept his grip on his arm, tugging lightly to help Hajime regain balance. Hajime scowled and tried to pull his arm away.

“I’m fine now… it’s good…”

“You’re not fine until you’re standing.” Komaeda replied with a tug.

The force from his tug sent Hajime flying into him. Hajime felt Komaeda’s chest against his before his mouth was met with the heavy fabric of Komaeda’s jacket and the cotton of his shirt. Soon the warmth from Komaeda seeped into his body. Hajime struggled to lift his head and gave up, lying on top of Komaeda. He’d be lying if he said the position wasn’t… familiar.

“Hinata-kun…” Komaeda sighed, lifting one arm, running it down his back.

Hajime pouted, “I had it…”

Komaeda hummed and continued to stroke Hajime’s back, warm fingers dancing down his spine, “Can you get up?”
His arms didn’t want to move. Hajime forced them to push his body up, but he fell back onto Komaeda, the room still spinning. However, at least he didn’t have to stare at the pink and strawberries.

“I can… in a moment.” Hajime mumbled.

Komaeda didn’t call him out and instead continued to trace his fingers down his back.

The bed was soft, warm, and unfamiliar. There was the way the pillow sort of molded around his head and the way the mattress dipped and curved into his body. It was gracing his edges, not quite holding him properly. Shifting Hajime moved until he felt something warm and solid against his side. Opening his eyes, he saw a puff of auburn hair.

Komaeda’s chest was still rising evenly and a small hiss of air escaping his lips as he slept. A bit of hair was stuck against the corner of his lips. Hajime lifted an arm and bushed Komaeda’s hair away from his face. The dream played in his head. The important facts, like starving and the strange design of the house (strawberries?) was pushed aside as his brain focused on the encounter with Komaeda.

Hajime’s face burned, though it felt a bit silly considering what had happened and where he was. Brushing that also to the side, Hajime slowly moved forward until he was in Komaeda’s arms. The heat seeped through, so much stronger than in his dream. Bare skin touched as Hajime carefully lay his head against Komaeda’s chest, closing his eyes. Slowly Hajime drifted a bit, dancing between asleep and awake. Time passed, but Hajime wasn’t sure how much.

The buzzing of his phone pulled him back. Hajime felt Komaeda shift awake, turning a bit to grab the phone, passing it to Hajime. He felt Komaeda pull him back closer. He snuggled against Komaeda as he answered.

“Hello?”

“H-Hajime…” Owari’s voice stuttered on the other end.

“Owari? What’s wrong?”

“I… I had a dream.” She replied, “W-we were in this weird house with strawberries and grapes… but we were so hungry… I met up with you and Sonia and we went to this circular room and there was… a body… on the floor. Sort of…”

“Sort of?” Hajime looked at Komaeda who shrugged.

“It was a metal body, like a robot… but despite that I was so sad… so angry… he was dead… and I never got to…” Her voice cut off with a sob.

“Owari…” Hajime gently started before biting his lip, “It’s going to be fine. We’ll find him here, living…”

Owari deeply breathed, “Yeah… we will… thanks Hajime…” She took another deep breath, “I’m going to… go for a run.”

“Okay.” Hajime snuggled into Komaeda, “I’ll talk to you soon.”

The call dropped. Hajime dropped his phone behind him and let Komaeda pull him closer. Their bare legs tangled and Hajime felt a bit of a blush accompany his smile.
“Good morning, Hajime.” Komaeda hummed.

“Good morning… Nagito.” Hajime muttered, “Did you sleep well?”

“After what we did?” Komaeda laughed, “I should think so. I’m a bit sore though. I can run us a bath. I have a large tub.”

The offer was clear. Hajime flushed and nodded, “That… sounds great.”

Komaeda leaned over and kissed him tenderly, briefly, before pulling away, “I’ll also ask June to start up breakfast… or… brunch I suppose.” Komaeda winced as he looked at the time.

“Okay.” Hajime sat up and stretched, “I’ll just be here… waiting.”

“I’ll be back soon.” Komaeda promised and pressed a kiss to Hajime’s forehead before leaving the bed.

~~

‘I’m going to try tomorrow. Could a couple people come with me?’ -Sonia

~~

Hajime had never ventured into the Drama building before. Staring a bit at it, he followed Sonia, Souda nearly bumping into them when they got to the narrow entrance. Sonia was tapping her phone, glancing at it a couple of times before pocketing it and turning around.

“Okay. According to the building layout there is a cafeteria that is very popular around this area of the campus. We can hang around there. It’s almost lunch time… I hope… this goes well.”

“It will be fine.” Hajime automatically replied, “We got this.”

“And if not, we’ll always have a next time.” Souda helpfully replied, “We’re doing this together.”

“Thank you, Hajime, Kazuichi.” Sonia gave a graceful smile. “Let’s go.”

The cafeteria Sonia mentioned was large, with many tables, all different sizes. In the front along the side was the cafeteria, with large chalkboard signs, all advertising sandwiches, soups, and salads.

“Wow…” Souda stared, “Why is this the first time I’ve seen this place?”

“There are too many places on campus to know them all.” Hajime muttered, taking it in. “Shall we get a table?”

“Sure.” Sonia scanned the area, “Let’s get this one.” She pointed to a table slight out of the middle, but not quite on the left-hand side.

They sat down and Hajime took another look. Sonia had picked a good location. The door was easily seen, yet they didn’t stand out. So far, so good. The sitting area was a bit empty, but Hajime had no doubt it would fill up as lunch time approached.

Sonia stood up, “I’m going to go get something. Do you want anything?”

Hajime stammered a bit, “Uh…”

“Coffee.” Souda replied. “For both of us.”
“Okay.”

Sonia walked to the counter and after a moment she returned with the drinks. Hajime thanked her and sipped his coffee slowly. “So, what is our plan?”

“Well, we need to see if he comes here…” Sonia bit her lip, “Then I think I should talk to him. Hopefully he remembers me from the performance.”

Souda smiled and reached over, lightly rubbing her shoulder, “Don’t worry Sonia. We can help you out too. Maybe we can get him to sit over here with us?”

Hajime nodded, “We’ll see how it goes.”

The cafeteria was slowly filling up, people trickling in, lining up to buy food. Hajime wrapped his hand around his coffee as he carefully watched the people coming in. So far… nothing. He sipped his coffee and looked down, giving side glances. More people walked in and the air was filled with chatter. Sonia was sipping her drink, her gaze tilted down. Souda was tapping the table. They… probably looked strange, sitting, not talking. Hajime set his coffee down and was about to talk when he walked in.

Tanaka was talking with someone, dressed in dark colours, a purple scarf wrapped around his neck. Sonia sat up straight, her gaze unwavering as she slowly got out of her chair.

“I’m just going to…”

She didn’t finish her sentence. Hajime watched as Sonia slowly walked over, smoothing her shirt, clasping her shaking hands together. Hajime glanced at Souda, who was unblinking. It felt a bit private, to watch Sonia walk up to Tanaka. Hajime averted his gaze and finished his coffee, wishing he had more.

“Is it… okay?” Hajime quietly asked looking up barely, just to see Souda.

Souda turned his head slightly, “They’re talking… it looks fine.”

“Should we just… sit here?” Hajime asked.

“I…” Souda started.

His voice cut off. Hajime looked up in time to see Sonia returning with Tanaka in tow. Both had food in their hands and were talking. Sonia smiled and set her food down, brushing her hair back.

“But I wouldn’t have considered seeing Improv until Hajime and his boyfriend told me how much they enjoyed it.”

Ah. Hajime nodded, “Yes. We went twice. It really was enjoyable.”

Tanaka blinked before grinning, “I see. Truly, that makes me elated to hear my passion has been shared and passed on between mortals such as yourselves.”

The way he spoke… Hajime felt Souda lightly kick him under the table.

“I hope to see another Improv show in the future.” Sonia sweetly said.

Was it Hajime, or was Tanaka blushing a bit? He hid a grin and watched as he nodded slowly, stepping away.
“It seems I have gained a follower, bewitched by my craft.” He muttered. “Perchance, if the stars align correctly, we shall have another meeting. Until then…” He slowly edged away.

“Ah, wait a moment.” Sonia pulled her phone out, “Could you tell me when the next show is? I’ll make a note.”

Tanaka’s face was a bit flushed. Slowly he pulled his phone out. Sonia stood beside him, unlocking her phone. Silence filled the space and Hajime quickly formed a question. There was no need to waste an opportunity.

“So, have you been interested in acting for a while?” Hajime asked.

Tanaka looked up from his phone and nodded, “The calling has spoken in my ear since I was but a fledgling. I answered the call and have discovered great enjoyment in the art of acting.”

“Kind of like you, hey Hajime.” Souda spoke, elbowing him, “You’ve been drawing ever since I met you.”

“Drawing?” Tanaka’s eyes widened, finger paused on his phone screen, “You too have been touched and called upon by the force of the arts?”

“Uh… yes.” Hajime replied, “I’m an Art major.”

He got a nod of acknowledgement before turning to his phone, tapping, “Here is the schedule of our performances. The next one will be just before the eve of the turn to winter.”

“Okay.” Sonia typed away before nodding, “Thank you. Please, enjoy your lunch. I’ll come see the next performance.”

“Very well. I shall take my leave.”

Sonia waited until he was gone before sitting down, smiling. Setting her phone down she showed them the calendar. “Do you have a picture of the sheet Koizumi has?”

Oh. Hajime pulled his phone out, “Here.”

“I’m just going to compare… see if it’s the same.”

“Good idea.” Souda leaned over, “Let’s see…” He enlarged the picture, “Yeah… seems like Koizumi got the correct information.”

“Great” Sonia pocked her phone and smiled, unwrapping her lunch, “It was brief, but… I think it went well.”

“Yes, it did.” Souda said and stood up, “Now, I’m starving. I’m going to get something.”

Hajime stood up too, “Right, me too.”

~

‘So, it went well?’ – Peko
‘Yes, it was brief, but it was good.’ – Hajime
‘Did you get anything else out of him?’ – Fuyuhiko
‘Like a phone number?’ – Owari

‘Owari! No… I didn’t…’ – Sonia

‘I just learned that he’s been into acting since he was young.’ – Hajime

‘That was helpful information… good job.’ – Saionji

‘No need to be snarky.’ – Hajime

‘What matters is we established a connection.’ – Nagito

‘And hopefully see if he remembers something.’ – Nagito

‘I wish he just remember things like Koizumi and Saionji did.’ – Kazuichi

‘Yeah, well not everyone is as great as Mahiru and I.’ – Saionji

‘Ego alert…’ – Kazuichi

‘Never mind that. We’ll just have to see what happens next.’ – Peko

‘I got it.’ – Sonia

‘Leave the information gathering to me!’ – Sonia

‘I was going to anyways, I’m busy with a new routine.’ – Saionji

‘Plus, I don’t go to University.’ – Saionji

‘Are you sure? We can help you.’ – Hajime

‘Hajime is right; we can be of assistance.’ – Peko

‘Say the word and I’ll get my people on the job.’ – Fuyuhiko

‘That’s kind of you, but let’s use that as a last resort…’ – Sonia

‘I agree. We can do a lot of ground work simply by being on campus.’ – Koizumi

‘Sonia’s just afraid bringing in the Yakuza would scare him off.’ – Saionji

‘SAIONJI that’s not true!’ – Sonia

‘I’m cutting this off before it gets out of hand.’ – Peko

‘Either way, our assistance is offered and we are going to help.’ – Peko

~

Saionji had stopped crying and Hajime watched as they all spewed apologies. The words rang in his ears… just because the appearance was dark didn’t mean the intent was… Hajime felt his heart lift a bit. Despite the worries weighing in his heart, the murders, the trials, the executions, and Kuzuryuu’s safety… he felt a bit at ease…

Suddenly there was more yelling. Hajime whipped his head around to see Tanaka and Komaeda staring at the memorial, Tanaka with horror and Komaeda with distain. As Tanaka spewed about
destroying the memorial and Komaeda agreeing, Hajime let out a sigh. It was slightly embarrassing to misunderstand Saionji’s intentions, but it was a happy scene, something that was lacking recently.

Hajime woke up blinking. The dream was… strangely nice… and Tanaka was in it. Gingerly he sat up and, trying his best to not jostle Komaeda, who was breathing lightly beside him, Hajime grabbed his sketchbook and began to sketch.

Chapter End Notes

File Room: I debated on how Kuzuryuu's Family keeps documents and even if it seems impractical to have sensitive information lying around... I just wanted to have a fun parallel to the second trial in DR 1 with the file room in the library.

Family: I capitalized it because I'm referring to the Kuzuryryuu Clan.

 Ikebana File: Oh like Kuzuryuu didn't extensively research them the moment Pekoyama said she wanted to join... for purely educational reasons and curiosity, of course...

 Pet Metropolis: I literally just picked the first name that came to my mind. If it is the name of an actual pet store... sorry

 Komaeda's Staff: I wanted to make them feel warm. I had a lot of fun writing them.

 Cafeteria: I based this off of a building on my local campus. It's technically financed by a local family and sort of not a part technically of the University. However, the cafeteria inside it was very popular because of the healthy and variety of selection. Even if people didn't have class in the building, they'd go for the food.

 Text Messages: I did this because I realized I have had a lack of group chats in the story and... as stated in my note at the beginning... I've been playing Mystic Messenger...
Loose Ends

Chapter Notes

Okay. I feel like this chapter has been a bit filler like with me setting stuff up to knock down later. I wanted to get more Gundham in here, but I also wanted to weave Tsumiki back in... so I did so. Next time I'll get the group re-focused on seeing if Gundham remembers or not. I've mentioned before how foolish I feel trying to bring everyone into the story... but at this point I got ideas for them all so I figured I should go ahead.

On a brighter note, I've replayed a lot of SDR2 (mainly the trials) and it's been helpful for my mental time line. Refreshers are always good.

Anyways, I hope everyone enjoys this chapter. My brain was all over the place with the scenes. I swear the first bits I wrote were just KomaHina fluff (brain, WHY?).

Feel free to leave a kudos or a comment. I love them and they make me smile.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Morning.” Komaeda hummed, wrapping his arms around Hajime, leaning against him.

Hajime smiled and continued to cook, “Good morning.”

“I saw your sketchbook.” Komaeda muttered, pressing light kisses against the back of Hajime’s neck, “Please tell me that wasn’t a memorial for Koizumi.”

Hajime chuckled, “You reacted the same way in the dream, though it was a bit harsher. Yes. It was a memorial. Saionji made it with a lot of care and love.”

“Right. Sorry.” Komaeda pressed one more lingering kiss, before pulling away, “I’m stealing your shower later.”

“That sounds physically impossible.” Hajime replied.

“I think I’d like to steal you too.” Komaeda continued, without pause.

A blush filled the bridge of Hajime’s nose, staining his cheeks a warm glow. His stomach fluttered at the ease of their morning. It was calm and languid, like molasses dripping out of a bottle, pooling warmly in his stomach. Hajime laughed and turned around, rolling his eyes.

“You’ll have to do the dishes to earn me.” Hajime said.

“I thought I said I was stealing you.” Komaeda raised an eyebrow, “Stealing implies not paying.”

“Unfortunately stealing me comes with dishes attached. Nice try.” Hajime cheekily added.

Komaeda laughed, “Fine. I accept. This time.”

~

Flopping down Hajime watched Souda smoothly pin Pekoyama to the ground before getting off,
wiping his forehead. Pekoyama stood up, giving a nod, before stretching carefully, rubbing her shoulder. Tossing a water bottle over to Souda, Hajime took a long sip of his own.

“Much better.” Pekoyama approved, “Your holds are better. We can move onto reviewing knife disarming.”

“Okay.” Hajime nodded.

Pekoyama walked over, still rubbing her shoulder, before taking her own water, “So, anything new with Tanaka?”

Hajime hummed, “Well, besides the first meeting with Sonia… nothing.”

“I see.” Pekoyama quietly said, continuing to rub her shoulder.

Hajime frowned and looked. Pekoyama was still rubbing it lightly, biting her lip. Hajime turned his head and looked at Souda. He didn’t twist her arm badly, did he? It felt impossible to consider. Pekoyama was like a force of nature; Hajime couldn’t imagine Pekoyama hurt.

“Is something wrong Peko?” Hajime gently asked.

“Pardon?” She blinked, her hand dropping.

“Uh…” Hajime felt a bit of pink tinge his cheeks, “It’s just… you were rubbing your shoulder. Kazuichi didn’t… hurt you?”

Souda dropped his water bottle, “What?” He scooted over, face pale, “I… I was just doing what you taught…”

Pekoyama looked down, “It’s nothing…”

“Are you sure?” Hajime asked, “I could go get some ice?”

“No… it’s…” Pekoyama bit her lip, “I was going to wait until everyone was here to show it.”

Show… what? Hajime looked over at Souda, who shrugged. Turning back to Pekoyama Hajime watched her slowly turn around, pulling her shirt down a bit, exposing her back.

The dragon curled around her shoulder in vague, geometric shapes, the curled tail ending at her shoulder blade. It was eastern in design and all black. Hajime stared. The skin around the tattoo was still a bit red. Beside him he heard Souda gasp.

“I… oh god I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Souda asked, “I mean, it’s still sensitive and I was throwing you around…”

“I’m fine. I promise.” Pekoyama gently said, “I didn’t want to cancel our session because of a minor inconvenience.”

“Minor?” Hajime lifted his hand, finger tips hovering over the inked skin, “It’s lovely. When did you get it?”

“A week ago,” Pekoyama replied, “We were just busy with Tanaka for me to bring this up.”

“Yeah, it’s great.” Souda echoed Hajime, “Though I’m still sorry. Tattoos take a while to heal, especially larger ones.”
“Apology accepted.” Pekoyama adjusted her shirt again, “Anyways… let’s continue with knife disarming.”

Hajime looked at Souda, who was standing up slowly. Pekoyama gave a small smile, “I’ll have you two disarm each other today. If it makes you feel a bit better.” She kindly added to Souda.

“Thanks.” Souda muttered.

~

He spotted Sonia and Tanaka walking side by side. Tanaka was staring at Sonia, his eyes glued to her as she looked ahead, laughing, and moving her hands in gesture, only pausing when she spotted him. Hajime waved and smiled and walked over towards them.

“…and then we found Buttercup, sitting in my dad’s computer chair. The chair was covered in cat hair. It took us weeks to clean it up.” Sonia laughed.

“That was a pleasant tale about your fierce feline companion.” Tanaka smiled, “Your pact with the noble Buttercup sounds like a strong one, forged in the fires and blood one encounters on the road of relationships.”

Sonia giggled and nodded, smiling widely, “Buttercup was a good cat. She lived a long life. I often miss her.”

“Fret not, Buttercup, your feline companion is still with you, in spirit, protecting and guiding you even now.” Tanaka said with a soft, strong voice.

“Thank you.” Sonia replied, “I’m sorry Hajime. How are you?”

“I’m good.” Hajime said, “And don’t worry. I was enjoying listening to the end of your story. You’ll have to tell me the full thing later.”

“I will.” Sonia laughed.

“Though I didn’t know you had a cat.” Hajime mused.

“Oh…” Sonia blushed, “Buttercup was my cat when I was very little. She died before I entered middle school.”

“I see…” Hajime turned to Tanaka, “Ah, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. Hello Tanaka-san.”

Tanaka eyed him before replying, “Simply Tanaka will do mortal.”

“Tanaka then.” Hajime nodded, “Anyways, I best be off. Printmaking won’t do itself.”

“Ah. Right. I’ll talk to you soon.” Sonia gently said, “We’ll be off.”

“Good bye, Sonia, Tanaka.”

He waved and walked off. Out of the corner of his eye, Hajime watched Sonia and Tanaka continue their conversation, walking side by side. He smiled.

~

Hajime set is paint brush down and looked over at his phone. It was blinking, indicating he had some texts. Grabbing his phone, he unlocked it and checked. It was Sonia.
‘Sorry for not phoning… I didn’t want to bother you.’ – Sonia

‘It’s just… I dreamed about something. I saw Saionji, having troubles putting on her kimono. I suggested to her to… go to the Music Venue because there was a full-length mirror…’ – Sonia

‘The next thing I know… she’s dead… tapped to the pillar.’ – Sonia

Saionji’s death… Hajime picked up his paint brush and tapped the end against the canvas. So… that was how she unknowingly walked to her death… he set his paint brush down again. Standing up, Hajime stretched and walked back to his room, grabbing his sketchbook.

‘Thanks Sonia.’ He quickly typed out, ‘I’ll… add that.’ Hajime sent the message and sighed. ‘How are you feeling?’

His phone lit up a second later.

‘I’m fine. Thank you.’ – Sonia

‘I’ll leave you to your day.’ – Sonia

‘Okay. If you need anything else… please don’t hesitate to call me.’ – Hajime

Hajime set his phone down and began to sketch.

~

“This timeline stuff is heavy.” Komaeda commented.

“It’s also slightly annoying.” Hajime added as he put his shoes on, “We dream things… but so many holes are still present.”

“I know…” Komaeda opened the file and leafed through, “Koizumi’s death is well documented… but the rest…”

“That’s because everyone involved remembers.” Hajime said.

“Right.” Komaeda replied, “We don’t even know the entire circumstances of the other trials…”

Hajime nodded, “With Sonia’s dream maybe if we talk to Saionji she’ll remember something. I hope.”

“I’m sure our meeting will go well.” Komaeda assured.

His words filled Hajime with a bit of hope. Their dreams… would get a connection. They’d figure out everything soon. Stuffing his wallet into his pocket, Hajime opened the door, grabbing his keys. Komaeda walked out and stopped, letting out a small sound. Hajime looked. What was he doing?

Standing at the front was Tsumiki, her back to them. She was glancing around, trying to peak over the gate. In her arms, she was holding flowers and a small bag. Upon hearing them, she turned around. Hajime locked his door and walked over, Komaeda in tow.

“Tsumiki-san?” Hajime asked.

“H-Hinata…san… K-Komaeda…san…” She stammered, her face pinking, “I…”
“Can we help you with something?” Komaeda asked kindly.

Tsumiki held up the bag and flowers, “I-It’s been about a month since Kuzuryuu-san and Pekoyama-san helped me get my… current job… I w-wanted to send a t-thank you… but its r-rude to not give in p-person…”

Her job? Hajime stared, “Uh… how do you know Fuyuhiko helped with that?”

He almost regretted asking her. Tsumiki nearly dropped the flowers, “I-I… oh this s-sounds suspicious… I-It is nothing like that…” She stammered, “O-one of my c-coworkers m-mentioned it…”

Oh… that made sense. Hajime blushed, “I didn’t mean to accuse… so why are you here?”

“I-I c-couldn’t f-find his address… I s-suppose it makes sense…” Tsumiki stammered, “S-so… I looked up y-your address… I-I’m sorry!” She bowed.

Hajime looked at Komaeda, who gave a small nod. Hajime smiled. “It’s okay. I understand. We’ll be more than happy to give the gift to Fuyuhiko and Peko.”

“R-Really?” Tsumiki’s eyes widened, “T-Thank you so much…” She handed the box and flowers.

“I-It’s just sweets… M-Mitarai helped me pick them out… and t-the flowers too…”

“Thank you.” Hajime accepted the items.

“I-I’ll be g-going then. T-thank you again…” Tsumiki gave one last bow before walking away.

As soon as she was gone, Hajime walked to his car, opening it. Komaeda immediately got inside, sitting in the passenger’s seat.

“That was rather sweet of her.” Komaeda mused, “Here, I’ll hold those.”

“Along with the file?” Hajime asked, “That’s a lot. You can put the file stuff in the back.”

“It’s fine. I got this.” Komaeda took the bag and flowers without hesitation. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

They drove in silence, Hajime taking the familiar paths to Kuzuryuu’s house. As he pulled up, Hajime saw another car. They… were probably the last ones to arrive. Cutting the engine, they exited, Hajime locking the door. Silently he took the bag and flowers from Komaeda.

Taking their shoes off they padded lightly down the hall, to the usual room. As he opened the door, Kuzuryuu looked up. Sonia was pouring tea and Souda was chatting with Owari. Saionji and Koizumi were looking at her camera.

“Took you long enough.” Saionji muttered as they walked in.


“Hello, sorry we’re a bit late.” Hajime rubbed his head, “We ran into Tsumiki outside my place.”

At the sound of her name, Saionji turned away, Koizumi leaning closer, whispering something in her ear. Hajime ignored it and handed the flowers and bag over.
“She said it’s sweets.” Hajime informed.

“She’s just going to test the gifts. See if they’re safe.” Kuzuryuu sighed, “Pain in the neck… but such is the way my life goes.”

Oh… that… was sad… but made sense.

“Yeah…” Kuzuryuu rubbed his head, “It was a gift. Go ahead.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Owari grabbed one of the sweets and began to eat.

“Thank you.” Koizumi delicately picked one up.

Hajime stared. He didn’t know how the sweets were tested, but he wasn’t going to ask. Picking up one he bit into it, tasting the anko. Smiling he consumed the entire thing. It was delicious.

“We’ll start the meeting now.” Pekoyama firmly said, “Anything new?”

“I’ve been talking with Tanaka.” Sonia replied, “It’s… nice. He really likes animals and I got the address to his workplace. However, he doesn’t remember anything. I think. I’ve thrown a few hints, but nothing.”

It could take time.” Komaeda mused, “I didn’t remember until…”

“Until Hajime screwed up and got you paranoid.” Saionji finished.

Komaeda’s mouth twisted, “I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

“Anyways…” Hajime grabbed Komaeda’s hand, gently rubbing circles into it, “I dreamed about the memorial Saionji made for Koizumi… afterwards…”

“Memorial?” Koizumi looked at Saionji, “Even though the circumstances weren’t good… that’s
thoughtful.”

Saionji ducked and grabbed another sweet, “Yeah… only for you though.”

“I drew a picture.” Hajime opened the file and passed it.

“Speaking of dreams.” Sonia accepted the drawing, looking at it, “I dreamed too… it…” Sonia paused, “I dreamed of telling Saionji where to fix her kimono…”

It was subtle, but Hajime saw Saionji stiffen, her shoulders stilling for the barest of seconds, before she exhaled. At her side, she grabbed Koizumi’s hand. Hajime turned his head.

“And… I suggested a mirror at a Music Venue.” Sonia passed the drawing to Souda, “The next thing I know… Saionji… is…” She bowed her head.

“I… see…” Pekoyama carefully looked over, “I hate to ask this… does it sound familiar?”

Saionji let out a bit of a wheeze, “I… it’s like an imprint. I sort of remember the lead up…” She audibly shut her jaw before forcing it open, “It’s how I stumbled accidently to the scene being set up.”

“Thank you.” Pekoyama didn’t ask more.

“Still…” Komaeda spoke up, “We know more about Saionji… but who is the other body? The hanging one?”

Good question. Hajime looked around the room. Everyone was looking down. He redirected his gaze to Saionji and Koizumi. “Sorry to ask this… but do you two have any idea?”

“What?” Saionji snapped her gaze up, “No… the place was dark… I have no idea.”

“Sorry… if Hiyoko doesn’t know…” Koizumi shrugged.

“I see…” Komaeda sighed, “Most unfortunate. Everything still feels wrapped in mystery.”

“Komaeda is right.” Sonia pipped up, “Though we do know a couple things for certain. The dead body isn’t Tanaka… or… Owari’s guy…”

“Nidai Nekomaru.” Owari supplied.

“And judging from the various sketches Hajime has made,” Pekoyama gestured to the file, “I think it’s safe to say the dead body isn’t anyone in the room.”

No one in the room. Hajime frowned. She was right. The pieces from the other dreams told them so and besides Tsumiki and Tanaka… there was only one other person who appeared in their dreams not mentioned…

“What about Mioda-san?” Hajime offered.

“Mioda?” Souda frowned, “The singer Sonia saw at her cousin’s wedding?”

“Yes.” Hajime nodded, “We’ve had her appear in our dreams. She’s connected to this. The other body could be hers.”

“That… is a possibility.” Sonia said, “Though we are still missing some people. For example, who was dead in Trial One? And…” She glanced over at Komaeda, “Who killed Komaeda?”
“Me?” Komaeda pointed to himself, “I mean… it’s not pleasant… but judging from the… drawing Hajime has… it looks like I killed myself?”

The room soured. Hajime swallowed. He didn’t want to remember the dream or the image of Komaeda dead… but… the reality that Komaeda killed himself… was supported by how they found the body… not to mention… dream him seemed certain it was suicide.

“That’s…” Souda rubbed his head, “I mean… but why? Why would you do that?”

“Good question.” Komaeda replied, “I suppose we’ll find out sooner or later… yes? Anyways… can I have another sweet?”

It was a weak attempt to change the subject, but Koizumi picked the box up and passed it over to him.

~

Hajime rolled over in bed. Sure, deep down, he knew, but hearing Komaeda say it aloud… it made the entire dream feel more tangible and real. Closing his eyes, Hajime tried to shove the image away. He didn’t… want to think about it. Slowly, he fell asleep.

~

Saionji practically threw the tickets at his face. Hajime barely had time to look up before he was smacked with the paper. Groaning he grabbed the paper and turned it over. The weight, the colour, and the text to the tickets was familiar.

“Your performance?”

“Uh… yeah, what else would it be?” Saionji huffed, “You’re coming.”

Was she… ordering him? Hajime hid a smile and looked at the tickets. He had two, “Am I to assume the second one is for Nagito?”

Her face turned a bit pink and Saionji glanced away, “Who else would you bring? Obviously, it’s for your boyfriend too.”

Right. Hajime tucked the tickets carefully in his wallet, “Ok. Thank you, Saionji.”

Saionji glared and folded her arms. “It isn’t like I’d be upset if you didn’t come.”

Her face was still pink. Hajime held his tongue, “Right. I’m looking forward to your performance.”

~

Class dragged on. Hajime leaned against his easel and stared at the model, sitting in the center of the room. He should be focusing on the sketch, but his brain felt disconnected from his body. Everything felt a bit mushy and Hajime glanced at the clock, hanging on the wall. Only one hour and forty-one minutes to go… he rubbed his head. Why did he show up today? Pulling his phone out of his pocket, Hajime checked his messages. Nothing. Sighing he tucked his pencil behind his ear and quickly typed a message out to Komaeda.

‘I don’t want to draw today. Save me.’ – Hajime

‘Sorry love, I’m tutoring. I wish I could rush out and save you. – Nagito
‘Next time. I promise. Say, I’ll finish tutoring around the same time as your art class. I’ll drive you home.’ – Nagito

Hajime felt his face burn at the endearment. Swallowing Hajime quickly typed a message back, his heart pounding so badly his fingers were shaking a bit.

‘Sounds good… I… I love you…’ – Hajime

‘I love you too Hajime. Now, time to get back to tutoring.’ – Nagito

Biting his lip, Hajime pocketed his phone and looked up. Only one hour and thirty-five minutes to go… knowing he was going to see Komaeda after… made the second hand on the clock seemingly move slower. Pulling his pencil from behind his ear, Hajime tried to refocus. Maybe, if he focused hard, the class would be over soon.

~

Komaeda was waiting for him outside the room. Hajime didn’t wait. He pushed through his classmates, ignoring their cries and complaints, and nearly tripped into Komaeda. A bright smile filled his face as Komaeda chuckled, gently reaching out to steady his balance. Hajime could feel a few of his classmates staring, but he didn’t care.

“Did you miss me that much?” Komaeda cheekily asked as he stepped a bit back.

Hajime felt his cheeks burn. He shuffled and readjusted his bag, “No… I’m just happy to be out of class…”

“Right.” Komaeda walked over and linked their arms together, pulling Hajime closer, “Let’s go.”

Hajime smiled, “Thanks for the ride home.”

“Anytime.” Komaeda hummed, “Truthfully I just want to spend time with you. This is all part of my elaborate plan.”

“Elaborate plan?” Hajime parroted, “Well, whatever you’re planning, it’s working.”

Komaeda laughed and tugged him out of the building. The sun streamed down and the day felt perfect.

~

If Komaeda planned to drive him home all the time, Hajime was sure he’d get nothing done. Dinner wasn’t started. Instead he was pinned to the couch, Komaeda heavily on top of him, as they kissed heavily, saliva dripping from between their lips as Komaeda took and took, pressing deeper, kissing Hajime until his stomach fluttered and an uncomfortable heat pooled in his core. Slanting their lips, Komaeda nibbled and sucked, leaving a trail of fire in Hajime’s body.

“N-Nagito…” Hajime turned his head, pulling away. His lips tingled with an over kissed sensation, “I-I’d like to get dinner ready…”

Komaeda licked his swollen lips and pressed sweet kisses to Hajime’s jaw, trailing down a bit, sucking on the skin, sending tingling sensations all throughout Hajime’s body, “I’m not stopping you Hajime.”

“Y-yeah you are…” Hajime moaned as Komaeda sucked hard on a tender spot, “I-I think this
qualifies.”

“You can get out from under me any time.” Komaeda hummed.

“I… you’re making this difficult.” Hajime settled, letting out a bit of high moan as Komaeda trailed down to his collarbones. “W-we can kiss later… let me start dinner.”

“Later?” Komaeda pulled away, “Are you… inviting me for dinner Hajime?”

Hajime felt a blush fill his cheeks, “I… think that’s obvious. So… let me start it? Otherwise we’re going to be hungry.”

“I’m already hungry.” Komaeda muttered, hands flitting down Hajime’s torso.

“You…” Hajime groaned, “That was… terrible.”

Komaeda laughed and got off, “Fine. Let me help you with dinner. We’ll continue this later.”

Later. Hajime felt his face burn, but he nodded, standing up, smoothing out his shirt, “Right. Let’s get started.”

The shrill tone of his phone rang in the room. Hajime groaned and slowly tried to sit up, but his muscles still felt languid and floppy, like cooked pasta. Tumbling over he landed on an unfamiliar lump. Komaeda. Hajime felt his heart flutter, but shoved that aside and moved. Said lump groaned in response and tried to bat him away. Pushing his arms, Hajime forced them to bend, using the body under him as a point of leverage. A bit of squirming occurred and Hajime muttered an apology. Grabbing his phone, Hajime properly sat up, wincing at the air hitting his bare chest. Answering it Hajime quickly snuggled back under the covers. At once Komaeda gravitated towards him, wrapping warm arms around his bare torso.

“Hello?” Hajime answered.

“H-Hajime…” Sonia’s voice came through, “I-I… it was awful…”

She broke down sobbing. Hajime adjusted himself so he was back upright, though Komaeda’s arms didn’t move from his torso, “Take your time.” Hajime gently said.

He could hear static before Sonia’s voice breathily came through followed by some deep inhales, “Thank you…” She inhaled again, “I… I dreamed something…” Her voice cracked.

Hajime opened his mouth, but Sonia continued, “I was wearing this dress… it was gorgeous… like those ones you see in fairy tales. I was in a castle… an actual castle… and these men wearing… bear helmets… came in… with these girls…”

There was no way for him to grab his pencil. Hajime settled on filing her story in his mind. Swallowing his mouth felt dry and scratchy. “What happened next?”

“They were so young…” Sonia continued, “I think the oldest was barely in middle school… I had them taken into a bathroom…”

Sonia let out a long, jagged sob. Hajime felt his heart twist and he reached out with his hand, only to remember… she wasn’t there. His hand fell with a soft thump onto the comforter. Biting his lip, Hajime decided the story could wait. Whatever Sonia had dreamed… it was terrible. She didn’t have
to tell him right away… it sounded too painful.

“I’m here for you Sonia.” Hajime tried, “I… I will listen to whatever you want to say. You don’t have to tell me if it’s…”

“No… I should do it now.” Sonia cut him off quickly, “I don’t want to linger on this for too long…” She took a deep breath, “The men forced them to sit in the tub and then with a long knife they… slit their throats… and wrists… one by one…”

Hajime gasped and felt his stomach churn. Komaeda’s arms tightened around him and he sat up, snuggling closer, chin resting on his shoulder. Hajime immediately grabbed onto him, feeling like if he didn’t, he’d float away.

“I stood there and let them do this. I was smiling… When each was done, they’d throw the corpse out and grab the next girl, and the next… until there was a pile at my feet…” Sonia paused and Hajime grabbed Komaeda tighter, “I then dismissed them. Then two girls came in, wearing maid outfits and bear helmets too… they helped me undress…”

His brain clicked the scene and Hajime doubled over, hearing Komaeda’s soft cry of his name, rubbing his hands up and down his back. Sonia’s voice wasn’t registering and Komaeda started to blur a bit. The room tilted and Hajime tried to stop the image from seeping into his mind: Sonia slowly sinking into a tub full of blood… her hair staining as she lay back…

Taking deep breathes Hajime forced his stomach to settle and his mouth to work, “Sonia… how…” Hajime paused. What could he say that didn’t sound silly? “How are you feeling?” was sort of a pointless question…

“I-It’s… I’m fine…” Sonia didn’t sound fine, “I’ll just…”

“Nagito and I can come over… if you want.” Hajime added, “I don’t want you alone…”

Sonia let out a light laugh, laced with relief and tears, “T-Thank you for your concern… I’d… like some company…”

Hajime nodded and looked at Komaeda. His eyes were narrowed and his mouth set a bit downward, “We’ll be over soon, is okay if Nagito comes along…?”

“Oh… Komaeda?” Sonia asked, “I mean… it’s fine… but will he be up?”

Hajime opened his mouth and answered without a thought, “I don’t mean to impose… it’s just he’s here and has been listening to this phone call… he’s worried too…”

As the words left Hajime felt his face heat up a bit… way to… broadcast… at the other end he heard Sonia gasp a bit and his cheeks warmed a lot.

“I see…” Sonia’s tone became lighter, “I’d love to have you two over.” She added.

Hajime could swear he heard a bit of teasing in her tone. It was better than sadness. He smiled and suddenly his face wasn’t as warm anymore.

“Ok. We’ll be over soon.” The call ended.

He dropped his phone and looked over. Komaeda was already standing up, giving a generous view of his backside as he hunted for his pants. Hajime wanted to enjoy the view, but perhaps another time.
“You can borrow some of my clothes.” Hajime told him, “We’re around the same height, so it should be fine.”

“Ah…” Komaeda turned around blushing, “Thanks…”

“We’ll find your clothes later.” Hajime stretched before he stood up and walked over to his closet, “Here.” He tossed some clothes at Komaeda.

“Thank you.”

Hajime nodded and began to change. This dream… it was different from the others. Just like Souda dreaming about murdering his parents, Owari dreaming about killing someone, Pekoyama dreaming about killing someone on Kuzuryuu’s orders, and Kuzuryuu not seeing out of an eye. These dreams felt like they were floating in space, unconnected, but Hajime knew… they were. Somehow… they had to be.

~

Komaeda stared a bit at Sonia’s place as they walked up. Hajime rang the bell. The door opened almost immediately. Sonia’s hair was down and her body shaking.

“Thank you… for coming.” She shut the door. “I’m sorry… it’s still a bit early.”

“It’s okay.” Hajime assured her, “Come, let’s make tea and something to eat. We can have breakfast together.”


Komaeda coughed and Hajime held back a small smile. It was fine. They couldn’t help that aspect of their lives. He took over, opening the fridge.

“Well you got rice here and vegetables. I can warm that rice up and make some salad. You also got some fish…” He started to pull things out before pausing, “I mean… it’s okay for me to do this?”

“Oh, yes… go ahead…” Sonia smiled. “I’ll help.”

“Oh, yes… go ahead…” Sonia smiled. “I’ll help.”

“Okay.” Hajime handed her the lettuce and cucumbers, “We’ll start with the salad and then it’s just simply frying the fish and warming up the rice.”

Sonia took the vegetables and began to walk over to the counter. She was almost there when suddenly she dropped the vegetables. Hajime froze and Komaeda rushed over, kneeling.

“Sonia, are you…?”

Sonia let out a big of a gasp and stepped back, staring at Komaeda. Hajime quickly shut the fridge and walked over, gently touching her shoulder.

“It’s fine Sonia. It was just an…”

“Servant?” She stepped out of Hajime’s grasp, “You’re…”

That word. A shiver, full, harsh, and cold ran down Hajime’s body violently. Sonia had turned around. Her eyes… it was just like Kuzuryuu’s… they were milky, a bit foggy. If he stared long enough, Hajime was sure he’d see spirals in her eyes. In front of him he watched Komaeda step back blinking, looking down at his arms before looking at Hajime. Sonia turned back to him and cocked
her head, stepping forward, hand stretching outward. The silence woven over the room felt like a spell. Hajime couldn’t move. He watched as Komaeda kept stepping back from Sonia’s hand, his hands grasping the counter as he did so. Hajime wanted to move. He tried to bend his knees. If he could just…

A loud sound filled the kitchen. Komaeda had rammed his hand against a container with cooking utensils. The spatulas and spoons clattered to the counter, breaking the spell. Hajime felt his body move, back under his control. Sonia stopped moving and her hand fell quickly to her side. She blinked and looked at the counter before gasping.

“Oh… Komaeda what… happened?” She started to grab the spatulas and spoons, “It’s fine… don’t worry.”

“Don’t…” Komaeda stared, “What… happened Sonia?”

“Huh?” Sonia asked.

“You called me… Servant.”

“Servant?” Sonia repeated, “I… did?”

Komaeda looked over at Hajime, eyes pleading. Hajime… swallowed. It… was the same as Kuzuryuu… the look… the lack of memory after. Except this time… she was awake for a bit before… acting different. Pulling his phone out, Hajime began to type.

“Hajime?”

“I’m getting the others here.” Hajime muttered, “You… you were acting like Fuyuhiko did… after he dreamed up his eye not working…”

“I…” Sonia paled, “Yes… please… get everyone over…”

~

The moment Koizumi and Saionji walked into the kitchen, Koizumi headed to Sonia, who was sitting at the table, a cup of tea in her hands, staring at the liquid.

“You said it was important.” Saionji huffed.

“Sorry.” Hajime nodded, “Let’s wait until everyone is here.”

“Well no need…”

Saionji was cut off by the bell ringing, followed by the door opening. Hajime peered over. Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama were taking their shoes off neatly, but Souda and Owari were practically throwing their shoes off.

“Sonia!” Souda called out, “Are you… you’re not hurt?”

“Souda.” She looked up. “I’m… fine.”

“What’s wrong Sonia?” Owari asked, sitting down.

“Hajime,” Kuzuryuu looked over.

“Right.” Hajime said looking at everyone, “Sonia phoned me this morning. She had a dream and
wanted some company. Nagito and I came over and we were barely here when she suddenly… had that same look you did.”

“I did?”

“When you woke up not seeing out of your eye, when I went to the hospital to see you.” Hajime clarified.


“She called me Servant.” Komaeda replied, “Before snapping out of it.”

“That’s it?” Saionji asked, “Nothing else happened?”

“No.” Hajime answered, “Nothing.”

“Then you’re wasting our time acting like this was an emergency.” Saionji huffed, “Sonia hasn’t hurt anyone… so acting like this is important…”

“Hey, this is important!” Souda cut her off.

“Anyways, what was Komaeda doing with you?” Saionji asked before grinning, “Were you two together this morning or what?”

Hajime felt his face warm up, “T-That doesn’t matter. Souda is right. This is important. Sonia didn’t start acting different when she woke up. It happened… afterwards. That’s… concerning.”

“Hajime’s right.” Koizumi spoke up, “Her personality shift was brief, but… that’s still concerning.”

Saionji’s mouth opened a bit before she shut it and nodded, “You’re right. This is important.”

What? Hajime stared. Her… shift… now was not the time to question it.

“You’re okay now, though, right?” Owari asked Sonia, gently touching her hand. “Do you remember anything?”

“I… just my dream…” Sonia muttered, “I… I phoned Hajime and he and Komaeda came over. We went to the kitchen. Next thing I knew the vegetables were on the floor and the spatulas and spoons over the counter.”

“I see…” Pekoyama said slowly. “May I ask what you dreamed about?”

Sonia paled again. Hajime took over. “I’ll explain. If that’s okay Sonia?”

“Yes… it is…”

What was happening to them? Hajime stared at the sky. The morning felt so… long, despite very few things happening. After he finished talking everyone slowly trickled out of Sonia’s house, though Souda was still lingering in the kitchen. Was it the right thing? To call everyone over so quickly? Hajime wasn’t sure… but the chill he felt from hearing Komaeda being called Servant… that didn’t feel minor. It felt… like something was trying to pull him under a strong current and drown him. Hajime shuddered.

“Hajime?” Komaeda’s voice hit his ears.
“Yes?” Hajime turned around, “Is… Sonia okay?”

“Souda said he’d stay a bit. I figured… it’s okay.”

“Right.” Hajime pulled his keys out, “Let’s… go… I suppose.”

“Okay.” Komaeda agreed.

Sitting in the car, Hajime turned the heat up. He couldn’t stop shivering. Why? It was just a word, so why was he so cold? It wasn’t even associated with him. He glanced over at Komaeda, who was fiddling with the seatbelt. Komaeda… looked fine… but how was he feeling?

“Hajime? You’re staring.”

He flushed at getting caught in the act, “I’m sorry I was just…”

“You also turned the heat up. Is everything okay?” Komaeda asked.

“I… it’s just… did you feel anything when Sonia called you Servant?”

“Huh?” Komaeda bit his lip, “No? Did you?”

“I… it’s left me a bit cold. I don’t know why.” Hajime confessed, reversing the car, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. No need to apologize.” Komaeda gently said, “Say… I know… this isn’t a good time… but I was thinking. Remember that restaurant we went to together? The home cooking one?”

“Ah… yes?” Hajime replied as he turned the car.

“I was thinking… could we visit it together some time this week? We’re giving the staff a week off this week and I was thinking we could…”

“Sure.” Hajime smiled, loving the topic change, even if it was for a moment, “I’d love that.”

Servant. Servant. Servant.

The word burned and rotted in his mind. Hajime groaned and shoved his textbook aside, leaning against his chair, looking up at his ceiling. It… it was nothing. Komaeda didn’t even feel something towards it… yet Hajime… it was poking at his mind, like an unfinished job. His brain couldn’t leave it alone. Sighing Hajime grabbed his sketchbook and began to draw, letting his mind wander. Hair fluffed like so… eyes… a thinner frame… Hajime paused. He was… drawing Komaeda? Staring at the drawing, Hajime looked. Komaeda was roughly sketched, a full body figure in the book. His pencil had stopped at his neck, a line going around it. Was Hajime drawing… a necklace or something? He dropped his pencil and stared. No… not a necklace. He swallowed and felt like a calcified lump had formed in his throat. Instead of a necklace… he saw a chain.

After the past couple of days, Hajime didn’t want to go grocery shopping, but his fridge demanded it. The week already felt long, despite only barely beginning. Sighing he walked into the grocery store, the lights and the cool air assaulting his senses. Hajime grabbed a basket and a cart, setting the basket in it. He had to buy… vegetables… tofu… Hajime ran down a mental list of basics. With routine, he got the things he wanted, putting the produce into the cart, before heading over to the meat. What should he get? Chicken was cheap, but Hajime didn’t feel like that… fish? Or maybe he could get
beef? Reaching over Hajime felt his arm bump into someone else’s. Flushing, he scrambled back.

“I’m sorry I…” His words left his lips.

“A-Ah I’m sorry too…” Tsumiki was rubbing her arm, “H-Hinata-san?”

“Just Hinata is fine.” Hajime corrected, “Out shopping I see.”

“S-sort of…” Tsumiki muttered, “I-I’m helping M-Mitarai.”

Mitarai… that was… her friend. Hajime tried to picture them, but no image was coming to mind. Not even their hair colour. He frowned, but shoved that away.

“I see. Oh, I gave Fuyuhiko and Peko the presents. The sweets were great. You picked well. Thank you.”

“N-no problem.” Tsumiki blushed, “I-I’m glad you liked them.”

“Anyways… I won’t keep you… I’ll just…”

“Mikan.” A soft voice drifted beside them, “There you are.”

Hajime turned around. Mitarai stood there, handing some items to Tsumiki, who was putting them into the basket. At the angle, Hajime was at, he couldn’t tell how long their hair was. And the lighting… was it brown or black?

“Say Mikan, I’ll take the cart and go get some bread. Could you go to the produce and grab some tofu?”

“S-sure.” Tsumiki stammered, “W-well good by Hinata. It was nice t-talking with you.”

She walked off. Hajime waved and smiled, “Well I best be on my way…”

“Wait.” Mitarai called out, “If you could… wait a moment please?”

Hajime turned around, “Yes?”

“This… may sound strange…” Mitarai calmly started, “But I can’t think of any other way to bring this up without sounding off… do you dream?”

Dream. It was a good thing Hajime didn’t have anything in his hands, or he would have dropped it. His jaw unhinged and he stared. This… felt like it was out of left field… how did they…?

“You’ve dreamed then?” Mitarai asked softly, “About other people? About Mikan? Before you met her too, right?”

“How did you…?”

“It’s a long story.” Mitarai quickly replied, “It might be easier if we… talk at a different time. You see… Mikan doesn’t remember. I don’t want her over hearing.” They reached into their pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, “This is my number. You can call me later and set up a meeting with everyone. Good bye.” They added.

Hajime didn’t see them leave. He gripped the paper and felt like the floor was collapsing under him. The week suddenly didn’t feel long, it felt impossibly stretched. His brain was swirling as the events he was trying to balance toppled over with Mitarai’s confession. It was going to continue being… a
long week…

“What the hell?” Saionji practically yelled, “You’re kidding me…”

“I’m afraid not.” Hajime leaned against Komaeda and closed his eyes, “I’m tried too. My brain wants a nap.”

“We don’t have that luxury now it seems.” Pekoyama muttered, “So… Tsumiki’s friend remembers?”

“Yes… I was in the grocery store and Tsumiki was going to return soon. We didn’t get much out.”

“Useless…” Saionji huffed.

“Oh, can it.” Kuzuryuu snapped. “Hajime got a number. I think that’s good enough for now. I suppose we’ll have to arrange a meeting with them. So, hurry up and tell us when is good for you.”

Saionji huffed, but did as he asked.

Chapter End Notes

Tattoo: I think it’s pretty obvious here, but that tattoo is clearly linked to the Kuzuryuu clan. Also while the size of her tattoo isn’t large, it would still be very tender and sore. I was lucky with mine, being smaller. I didn’t experience too much itching or soreness. Bottom line here, Peko, you should be careful!

Chair: True story, this happened to my neighbours when they went on vacation once. They returned home to their cat’s hair all over the computer’s desk chair. Needless to say weeks after we were still finding hair.

Kuzuryuu’s house: I figured, being a Yakuza and all… people can’t just look up in the phone book or online to where he lives… you know… for security and safety…

Ume: means plum. Also it’s extremely common in Japan to have stores dedicated to just sweets. Some stores become rather famous for selling and making sweets.

Anko: Red bean paste. It’s a common flavour for traditional sweets. I love it.

Servant: -laughs brokenly- I didn’t think I’d use Komaeda’s name from AE:UDG in this story… but here I am…

Grocery Shopping: In Japan, they have carts, but those are just wheels to hold a basket. When you get to the counter they take the basket and transfer your groceries to another one. Then, it’s up to you to bag your own groceries at a table at the end of the cashier. Unless, you bring your own bag. Then, they’ll bag your groceries for you.

Tofu: It may just be at the grocery store I got to, but the tofu is in a section close to the vegetables.

Beef: As most know, beef and red meat in general are harder to buy in large quantities
in Japan.

Mitarai: As a reminder, I am using Mitarai's name for the Imposter, as well as they/them pronouns.
Finally! I have been working on and off with this chapter, but I didn't get to Gundham, as much as I wanted to. Next time I'll get to him. I had a lot of fun writing this chapter, despite writing a lot of scenes out of order. Sorry for being a bit late with this... between writing Waking and foolishly starting Daredevil, I've had a bit of a scattered mind.

Anyways, as always feel free to leave a kudos or a comment. Not needed, but they always make my day.

Hajime looked at the notepad Kuzuryuu had handed to him. Everyone’s free days were written in a column, followed by potential dates written on the bottom. Hajime pulled the piece of paper that Mitarai gave him and carefully dialed it into his phone. After double checking, Hajime entered it and began to type out the message.

“Hi, this is Hinata Hajime... you know you talked to me in the grocery store? Are you free at the dates below? Please let me know soon.” – Hajime

He barely pocketed his phone when it rang. Hajime pulled it out and stared at the new message.

“I’m free on the Thursday. Where, are we meeting?” – Mitarai

Hajime scrambled and replied.

“I’ll text you the address.” – Hajime

Smiling he turned to the group chat and sent a message. Thursday… hopefully they’d get more answers. Turning to his desk, Hajime opened his sketchbook and flipped through it. Of course, he had photocopies, but those were tucked away. He was about to close the book when a sketch caught his eye.

Unlike most of his sketches with Komaeda, this one was in the main book, tucked in the back. Komaeda was sitting up, in a pod while he was at the side. Scrawled on the top was the single word, “Servant.” Hajime thickly swallowed. It was the same word Sonia had uttered in her kitchen. Hajime touched the word. He had... forgotten about this. Closing the book Hajime ignored the shiver down his spine.

~

Hajime gently touched Sonia’s shoulders as Owari and Souda bounded into Komaeda’s house. She gracefully turned and Hajime gave a small smile.

“Hey, I was just wondering how you’re feeling?”

Sonia smiled, “I’m good. Thank you, Hajime. You all were very kind to me.”

“I’m glad.” Hajime let the topic drop, “Come, we’re sitting in the front room. It’s this way.”
“My, my, you sure know Komaeda’s house well.” Sonia lightly said with a giggle.

“I…” Hajime felt a small blush fill his face, “Never mind, let’s go. Everyone else is waiting.”

They entered the room and Hajime immediately sat on the couch beside Komaeda. It felt a bit strange to be sitting in Komaeda’s home with everyone else. Granted, Hajime had only seen the place a couple of times, but it felt like a space of his had been invaded. Which was ridiculous; this was Komaeda’s house not his.

Shifting into the couch, Hajime watched as June walked in, setting a plate of baking and a large pot of tea on the table. Giving them a wink she grinned and turned to Komaeda.

“It’s been so long since you’ve had company over.” She chirped, “If you need anything else, just holler, okay Nagito?” She ruffled his hair.

“Yes, I will June.” Nagito smiled, “Thanks.”

“Aw…” Sonia’s eyes gleamed, “This looks so wonderful! Thank you!” She reached for a cookie.

“You’re most welcome.” June said before excusing herself.

Hajime leaned over and picked up a square, nibbling on it. The lemon of the square countered the sweetness. It was great. He leaned into the couch again and felt Komaeda’s arm wrap around his shoulders, comfortably sitting there. A bit of a flush filled Hajime’s cheeks, but it was covered up by a smile.

“So, when did we set up the meeting again?” Souda asked.

“I told them two o’clock.” Hajime promptly replied, “Should be here any moment.”

“Do we have some basic questions to ask?” Koizumi asked the room.

“I think we should focus on the events before and surrounding the first… murder.” Pekoyama carefully replied, “If they truly were the first to… die… they won’t know much beyond that.”

“That’s not a lot to work with,” Owari hummed, “But it’s better than nothing.”

“Maybe we can also get an idea about Tsumiki.” Kuzuryuu muttered, “One less unknown variable in this. We still have to figure out what Tanaka knows.”

That was true. Hajime’s sketchbook was lacking a lot of Tanaka and Tsumiki. This surprising turn of luck was something they needed to use and not let it go to waste. Besides maybe, Hajime discreetly looked over at Sonia, Mitarai would have some insight on the… strange behaviour Sonia and Kuzuryuu had shown. Ultimate Despair… it left a bitter taste on his tongue as Hajime remembered the smouldering, destroyed cities. Something had happened between the Program and the city, but it was unclear what.

The bell rang and Hajime turned his head. Komaeda stood up and walked over, peering out of the room, opening the French door. He waved his hand and stepped back. A moment later, Mitarai stepped in.

Hajime stared. Every time he saw them it was… a bit jarring. Hajime still wasn’t too sure what their hair colour was, nor the length. They were wearing a faded shirt and jeans so basic that Hajime knew he wouldn’t be able to spot them in the crowd.
“Hello.” Sonia gracefully broke the silence, “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

“Hello.” Mitarai replied, “I’m Mitarai Ryouta.”

“I’m Sonia Nevermind.” Sonia introduced herself.

Everyone started to introduce themselves. Mitarai nodded and smiled politely at each of them before sitting down in an empty arm chair. Komaeda shuffled forward and lifted the tea pot.

“Tea? Or coffee? I could ask June to make some.”

Mitarai shifted and looked down, “Tea’s fine.”

Komaeda poured them tea and sat back down, re-wrapping his arm around Hajime. “So, shall we start?”

“Right.” Mitarai sipped the tea and set the cup down, “First, I think you’re all aware, but Mikan doesn’t remember anything. I met her two years ago, and nothing.”

“We figured, but confirmation is good.” Pekoyama replied, “Can you tell us what you remember?”

“We were on an island. Then Monokuma came and we were told to kill each other if we have to get off the island.”

“Monokuma?” Saionji asked, “Isn’t that the… bear thing?”

“Yes.” Mitarai replied, “Then I got a note telling the murders would occur. I tried to stop it by arranging a party. We picked the Old Building and it was going well until… the blackout. I was prepared with night vision goggles.” They paused and looked over at Komaeda, “I saw you kneeling by the table and I ran after you.”

“Me?” Komaeda shuffled closer to Hajime, his arm heavy, “I suppose this was… my attempt?”

Mitarai’s lips twisted, “So you know? I tried to stop you take the knife and… I was stabbed multiple times.”

“And you don’t know who killed you?” Owari asked.

“No.” Mitarai replied. “Do you?”

Hajime shuffled and opened his sketchbook, “Well, we only got a guess, but… we think your murder was the first one… and…” He turned the book over, “This is Hanamura’s death.”

Mitarai reached over, “The Ultimate Chef?”

What? Hajime blinked, “Ultimate?”

Besides the phrase turning up with Despair and when Kuzuryuu called him “the Ultimate Doctor” Hajime’s mind was drawing blanks.

Mitarai stared, “Yes? Hopes Peak Academy? We were chosen for our talents?”

Talents? What kind of school was that?

“Care to elaborate?” Souda asked.
“I thought…” Mitarai rubbed their chin, “Hopes Peak Academy was our high school. The school chose people on their talents. No one could apply; the school scouted you. We all had our talents. Except Hajime, who didn’t remember his.”

Him? Hajime felt everyone give him a side glance. He shuffled. This problem… felt familiar. He’d have to go through his sketchbook later.

“So, what were our talents?” Saionji inquired.

“You were the Ultimate Traditional Dancer.” Mitarai replied, “And Koizumi was the Ultimate Photographer. Kuzuryuu, the Ultimate Yakuza, and Pekoyama the Ultimate Swordswoman.”

Hajime blinked all those talents… were basically their abilities, or in Kuzuryuu’s case, his family name.

“Sonia was the Ultimate Princess, Owari the Ultimate Gymnast, Souda the Ultimate Mechanic, and Komaeda the Ultimate Lucky Student.”

Those talents… some of them were easy to understand… but… Hajime looked over at Sonia and Kuzuryuu before staring at Komaeda. Komaeda turned and smiled, shrugging.

“Some of those talents…” Koizumi muttered, “I mean how can someone determine Princess and Yakuza are a talent? Also, luck?” She voiced Hajime’s thoughts.

“Well I must have had luck.” Komaeda muttered, absentmindedly rubbing Hajime’s shoulders, “Hajime has a drawing of me confessing to playing Russian Roulette wrong and surviving.”

“That’s true…” Koizumi huffed.

“Wrong?” Mitarai looked.

“I’ll show you the pictures later.” Hajime said, “You remember quite a bit.”

“Hey, what was your talent then?” Souda asked, “I mean you said you remembered everyone else’s besides Hajime’s.”

Mitarai shifted, “I… was the Ultimate Imposter.”

“Imposter?” Pekoyama raised an eyebrow.

“I…” Mitarai chuckled a bit, “I just imitated someone, took their identity. I wasn’t Mitarai when I was on the island. I was Togami.”

Togami? Hajime frowned. Didn’t he have a dream with someone named Togami appearing in it?

“Like the Togami Cooperation?” Kuzuryuu interjected. “Don’t tell me they’re involved with this too…”

“I’m not sure.” Mitarai answered, “That’s all I remember.”

“That’s still quite a bit. It’s very solid.” Sonia muttered, “Most of us have gaps in our memories, yours seem rather fluid.”

Mitarai reached for the tea cup, hands shaking a bit, “Well… it’s the only thing I remember, technically.”
“What?” Saionji blurted out, “What do you mean?”

“I met Mikan when I was in the hospital.” Mitarai started slowly, “I was told the police found me on the streets, unconscious. I don’t remember anything before that point. I had no ID on me and they couldn’t find a single record in any data base. When the police tried to locate any family or friends we got nothing.”

Was… that even possible? That sounded like a sci-fi story… Hajime stared, “So, nothing before that?”

“Not even my name. I chose the name Mitarai Ryouta after an animator. He’s only done shorts, but I watched a lot of them while I was in the hospital. I was drawn to them, so I stole his name. Ironic considering what my talent was.”

“And you just… remembered instantly?” Owari inquired.

“It came to me in pieces” They replied, “But essentially in chronological order. It was one reason I became friends with Mikan. Seeing her reminded me that I wasn’t imagining everything. Plus, she’s really kind.”

Saionji snorted and folded her arms, but said nothing.

“So, your memory loss explains how you remember so much…” Komaeda summed up, “But you remember everything after you woke up?”

“I do.”

“That’s so fascinating!” Sonia’s eyes were sparkling a bit, “I watch videos and documentaries on people such as yourself… I wonder if it was a supernatural event?”

“Uh…” Hajime rubbed his head, “Anyways… this has been helpful. I suppose it’s our turn to show you what we got…”

He passed the photocopies of the drawings. This… would take a while.

~

Hajime felt Komaeda snuggle against him. Komaeda’s bed still felt a bit too soft, but that was probably because he hadn’t stayed over as often. Their bare chests touched, still a bit too hot and sweaty. Lifting his hand, Hajime carted his fingers through Komaeda’s hair, tugging a bit on the auburn locks.

“This was enlightening.” Komaeda hummed, “Mitarai has solidified the beginning for us. This also means we know who Hanamura killed.”

“It is the only logical conclusion.” Hajime agreed, “But let’s not talk about that again.”

“Right.” Komaeda shifted over and pressed a kiss against Hajime’s cheek, “No depressing talk.”

“Just sleep.” Hajime firmly said.

“Good night Hajime.”

Komaeda pulled his head over and gently kissed Hajime, slowly tenderly. Hajime wrapped his arms around Komaeda and kissed him back, loving the languid, gentle nature. They parted with a soft puff of air between them. Komaeda’s eyes were twinkling and he pressed in again, kissing a bit harder
this time. Hajime groaned and pulled away, Komaeda laughing as he did.

“I said sleep.” Hajime grumbled, “I got class tomorrow.”

“Fine… the weekend then.” Komaeda huffed before snuggling closer to Hajime.

Hajime closed his eyes and let the warmth from Komaeda drift him off to sleep.

Slowly Hajime woke up, feeling the weight of Komaeda in his arms. The bottom arm was a bit numb from Komaeda lying on it all night, but it was a price Hajime didn’t mind paying occasionally. Shuffling closer, Hajime smelt Komaeda’s hair as it tickled his nose. It was nice. This was nice. Craning his head, Hajime glanced at the clock. He winced. He had an hour and a half before class, which didn’t feel like a lot of time. Flopping back down Hajime stared at the side.

The room was spacious and light. The wood was dark, but the walls were light, almost a misty blue. Hajime smiled. He could imagine himself painting in this room. Maybe he’d ask Komaeda later.

Komaeda shifted in his arms. Hajime turned and watched as Komaeda slowly woke, shifting, blinking before rubbing his eyes and turning to look at him.


“Oh?” Hajime idly lifted his hand and twirled the ends of Komaeda’s hair.

“We were in a trial room. I was being really snarky to everyone, but especially you.”

Him? Hajime looked up at the ceiling, “Do you know why?”

“No.” Komaeda sighed, “I think I saw this dream in your sketchbook already though. However, I do know that the murder was connected to a Funhouse.”

A Funhouse? “Anything on that?” Hajime turned his head.

“Um…” Komaeda’s brow furrowed, “Strawberries?”

“What?” Hajime blinked.

“There were… strawberries.” Komaeda firmly confirmed.

“Okay.” Hajime nodded, “I’ll… get on that. But now, I got to get up for class.”

Komaeda sighed and rolled over, arms up, and pulled Hajime down. Their lips met briefly, fleetingly, before they parted. Hajime swallowed and tried to not feel self conscious about his breath.

“Do you have time to shower with me?” Komaeda asked.

Hajime felt a blush fill his cheeks, “You’ll distract me.”

“Oh?” Komaeda gave a grin, “What are you thinking Hajime?”

Hajime grabbed his pillow and lightly smacked Komaeda’s shoulder with it, “You… I’m going to use your washroom.” Hajime started to get out of bed.

Warm arms lunged and wrapped around his waist. Hajime felt Komaeda pressing his face against his
shoulder blades, silently laughing.

“Sorry, sorry.” Komaeda wheezed, “I’ll behave.”

It felt a bit foolish to agree, but Hajime nodded his head, “Fine. You can join me.”

~

At least, it was the proper weather for a scarf. Hajime wrapped it around his neck and felt a blush not from the cool air, brush his cheeks. Komaeda was a… dirty liar… checking his cellphone Hajime pocketed it groaning. He was beyond late for his first class. It was unsalvageable, but at least he could make it to his second class. Hopefully he wouldn’t get paint all over his scarf.

“If I do, I’m billing Nagito…” Hajime muttered.

Turning the corner, Hajime went to one of the many cafés around the campus, pushing the door Hajime side jumped as someone was coming out, their shoulders bumping.

“Sorry,” Hajime said, “I… Tanaka-san?”

Tanaka adjusted his own scarf, a purple one, and looked at him, “Ah, you’re Sonia’s pact friend, yes?”

“Uh… yes?” Hajime shuffled, “Sorry again.”

“I barely felt it. Someone with such low astral power can’t harm me.” Tanaka calmly replied.

Low… what now? Hajime gave a smile, “Ah, anyways… I’m just going to get a coffee. It’s… lovely seeing you.”

“Wait.” Tanaka commanded firmly.

Hajime paused.

“Sonia informs me that she and her pact friends wish to view our dramatical performance on the eve of the winter solstice, correct?”

“Yes.” Hajime blinked, “The Improv Show.”

“Here.”

Tanaka dug into his coat pockets and pulled out some tickets. Hajime stared. Was this… a reoccurring thing? People giving him tickets in person?

“These are for you and your partner.” Tanaka handed him two.

Partner? Komaeda? Hajime flushed at hearing the label a loud, but he accepted the tickets. “How much?”

“You mean what do you sacrifice in return for the tickets?” Tanaka asked, “Usually mortals have to pay a price for these, but you’re Sonia’s pact friend. It’s free.”

Hajime pocketed the tickets, “Thank you. That’s very kind.”

Tanaka blushed a bit and turned his head, tugging a bit on his scarf, “If our interaction is complete now… I must flee to my class.”
“Uh good bye.” Hajime waved and watched Tanaka left.

The tickets felt warm in his pocket. Running into Tanaka was brief, but nice. Hajime smiled and walked into the café.

~

“You ran into Tanaka?” Sonia’s voice came clearly through his headphones.

“Yes,” Hajime wheeled his chair over and grabbed the colour he wanted. “It was accidental, but he gave me the tickets to his Improv.”

“Oh?” Sonia asked, “I’m going to see him tomorrow. By the way, can I show some of your art to him? Not any of the obvious dream stuff…” She quickly added, “He’s just been asking.”

“Sure.” Hajime agreed, “I got some stuff that might give insight to if he remembers or not. I’ll send some of the photos.”

“Thank you.” Sonia said, “I should have thought of this earlier but… we got distracted.”

Right. Hajime mixed his paint, “And you’re feeling all right?”

“Yes.” Sonia replied, “Thank you Hajime. I’ll… leave you to your afternoon.”

The call disconnected. Hajime unplugged his headphones and refocused on painting. The theme of movement was present in the way Saionji was dancing. Hajime smiled. It was nice to paint something not entirely dream related. Pulling up the reference picture, Hajime double checked the colour, before painting.

~

Adjusting his tie, Hajime carefully stepped back and looked in the mirror. His suit, an off grey colour looked sharp and nicely paired with his tie. On the lapel, Kuzuryuu’s pin gleamed. Hajime turned a bit and stared. It was always a bit jarring to see himself in elegant, tailor made clothes.

“Mm… you look gorgeous.” Komaeda hummed, wrapping his arms around him, leaning so his chin touched Hajime’s shoulder.

“Thanks.” Hajime leaned into the touch, “You look great too.”

“Thank you, Hajime.” Komaeda leaned over and kissed him lightly. “Let’s go. It’s kind of nice to have a matinee. I still want to take you to that home cooking restaurant. After?”

“Sure.” Hajime agreed. “Fuyuhiko should be here any moment.”

“I don’t know why he insisted on picking us up.” Komaeda hummed.

“Probably to see the reactions of everyone when we walk in together.” Hajime replied.

They walked down the stairs to the front of Komaeda’s house. Checking his phone one last time, Hajime quickly tapped a message out to Pekoyama.

“It’s funny.” Komaeda broke their silence, “We met officially at Saionji’s performance last year in the spring. I never thought I’d be going again with you.”

Hajime reached over and grabbed Komaeda’s hand, stroking the back of it. “Yeah… I’m just
grateful that we are… a thing.”

“A thing?” Komaeda raised an eyebrow, “Do you mean… dating? Boyfriends?”

“Y-Yes…” Hajime muttered, “Boyfriends.”

Komaeda leaned into him, wildly grinning. It felt so juvenile to be ecstatic about the word ‘boyfriend’, but Hajime couldn’t stop his heart from soaring.

The rumble of a car pulling up broke their moment. Hajime watched as Kuzuryuu’s limo pulled up. Walking over, Hajime watched as the driver got out and opened the door for them. Giving a thank you, Hajime got inside. Souda was already there, chatting with Sonia. Owari was sprawled, taking up two seats. Hajime sat beside Pekoyama on the other side, Komaeda following.

“Hey, Hajime.” Souda called over, waving.

“Hi Kazuichi.” Hajime greeted, “Are Koizumi and Saionji already at the theatre?”

“Yeah,” Owari replied, “Been there since this morning rehearsing.”

“We’re going to be on time for the reception.” Kuzuryuu informed them, “As such we need to go over some… tips.”

“Tips?” Souda scowled, “Not again. I think Hajime and I did a good job last time.”

“Last time,” Kuzuryuu drawled, “We surprised everyone with our associations. This time, they know. Plus,” He turned to Komaeda, “We got Komaeda with us. We’re going to be the center of attention whether we like it or not.”

“The gossip will go out of hand,” Pekoyama took over, “So let’s be careful.”

“Right, right,” Souda rolled his eyes, “Always am.”

“They’ll try to find gossip on us anyways,” Komaeda spoke calmly, “We just need to make sure it’s… relatively harmless. Besides, if you cared too much, you wouldn’t be picking us up.”

Kuzuryuu flashed a grin, “I can have fun with the circumstances too.”

“Geez…” Souda whined, “You’re confusing. Make up your mind.”

“Slight… poking at them is fine.” Pekoyama clarified, “Just don’t do anything foolish.”

Foolish. Right. Hajime leaned into the limo. They weren’t about to do anything too jaw dropping. Sure, Komaeda liked poking people every so often. Hajime’s mouth twitched as he remembered the art gallery. As long as they kept their poking to that, it would be fine.

“Anyways.” Sonia clapped her hands together, “Let’s focus on enjoying Saionji’s performance. Koizumi told me she will be taking pictures during the show, so we will see her afterwards.”

“Okay.” Souda nodded, “Are we sitting in the same place as last time?”

“Yes.” Pekoyama replied, “We are.”

The ride fell to a dull murmur. Hajime felt Komaeda grab his hand, stroking it lightly. It felt good to be with everyone, but especially Komaeda. Hajime didn’t want to sound too corny, just having Komaeda experience things with him was… nice.
When they pulled up to the theatre, Hajime felt the atmosphere shift. Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama slipped into a straight posture, poker faced look. Sonia gracefully curled her hands on her lap. Even Souda and Owari looked attentive. Hajime glanced at Komaeda, who had a calm, flat expression.

“Let’s go.” Kuzuryuu intoned.

The sunlight was warm and harsh. Hajime tried to not shield his eyes as he got out. The entrance was open and people were bustling inside. However, he could feel the eyes already. Holding a sigh back, Hajime waited until everyone was out of the limo before walking inside.

Like the last time, there was a reception in the hall. Hajime followed Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama inside. There were a lot of people already there, all of them turning and giving a look that morphed into a stare. Hajime held back a shiver. Unlike the last time, this stare was laser focused immediately. How did Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama deal with this? Hajime turned his head and shot a glance to Komaeda. And how was Komaeda handling this so gracefully? Beside him Hajime felt Souda shudder as the doors shut and they were inside. Immediately Komaeda took his hand and stroked it. The stared doubled onto them. Hajime swallowed and allowed Komaeda to pull him gently back, away from their cluster.

“It’s fine Hajime.” Komaeda muttered, “They just want to pick us for information. I find giving them a little something works.”

Hajime chuckled softly, “Like throwing a bone to a dog?”

“Overused comparison but it will do.” Komaeda conceded with grace, “Now, there should be something bubbly here.”

“I’m not drinking alcohol.” Hajime warned him, “Not here.”

“Of course,” Komaeda agreed, “Let’s get something bubbly and find someone harmless to talk to…” Komaeda turned and scanned the room, “Yoshizawa-san is a harmless old man. Cheerful. He doesn’t gossip, just tells the facts. Let’s to talk to him…”

Hajime numbly nodded and followed Komaeda to the man. Mr. Yoshizawa was wearing a neutral coloured yukata, yet in the lighting a subtle geometric pattern showed. Hajime raised his and flagged down a waiter as they got closer. Even though Komaeda had tried to be nice about it, Hajime wanted something to drink when their conversation turned awkward.

The waiter stopped. Hajime picked two tall glasses of something bubbly and handed one to Komaeda. Komaeda lifted it to his nose and sniffed before sipping.

“It’s fine. No alcohol.”

“Good.” Hajime sipped the drink. It tasted like apple, “Isn’t it too early to be consuming alcohol anyways?”

“I wouldn’t assume.” Komaeda sighed, “Anyways, let’s get to Mr. Yoshizawa.”

They walked, pushing through the crowds. Hajime let Komaeda lead as they walked and excused themselves. Mr. Yoshizawa was sitting by the window, no one around. They were so close…

“Nagito-kun.” A woman’s voice stopped them.

Hajime watched as Komaeda stiffened, ever so slightly for a moment, before turning around, a smile plastered to his face. “Kuroda-san…”
Mrs. Kuroda was a tall woman with an elegant kimono. The design was simple, befitting a woman of her age, and her hair was pulled back into a knot. Komaeda’s smile was still on his face as she walked up to them. Hajime felt Komaeda’s hand tightly grip his before letting go.

“Hello Kuroda-san. How lovely it is to see you here…”

“Who is this Nagito-kun? It’s strange to not see you come to an event like this without your parents.” She cut in and eyed Hajime, “And with someone… like him…”

Hajime could feel her laser eyes on his pin. He straightened his back. He wasn’t going to give this woman anything. It pained Hajime to admit this, but it was best if Komaeda dealt with the situation.

“Hajime is the one who invited me.” Komaeda lied smoothly, “It’s fortunate because of my parent’s busy schedules I don’t have to go alone now.”

Her eyes twitched at the drop of a first name. Hajime tightened his hands.

“I understand that sentiment.” She replied, “There are many lovely young girls you could have taken with you Nagito-kun. Hanging around certain company can… discourage them.”

Komaeda’s eyes flashed, “It was nice to chat with you. I don’t want to take up all your time.” He turned.

“Well it’s nice to see you at an event like this,” She slowly said, “Though I cannot help but question your current company. I’m sure your parents would…”

Hajime barely had time to open his mouth to defend himself. Komaeda reached and grabbed his hand, lacing their fingers together tightly. Pulling Hajime’s hand to his lips, Komaeda kissed his knuckles tenderly. A gasp ran through the room and Hajime felt his cheeks burn.

“I think I can be the judge of the company I keep.” Komaeda coolly replied, “And for the record, Kuroda-san, I’m not currently on the market for a girl.”

The look on her face. Hajime let that comfort him in the sea of gasps and immediate gossip. Cheekily, he opened his mouth.

“Kuroda-san?” He softly tested, “Just a friendly word of advice. I believe some matters should be left to… the individual, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her face morphed into one of twisted knobs, like an old, decrepit tree trunk. Slowly and as casually as they could, they walked away. Hajime could feel everyone’s gazes on them and hear the whispers. In the corner, he saw Kuzuryuu hold his hand back from smacking his forehead. However, Hajime smiled to himself and curled his fingers tighter in Komaeda’s grasp.

“You’re such a cheeky little shit.” Komaeda stage whispered, “She’s going to be out to get you.”

“I…” Hajime bit his lip, “It really isn’t her business who you’re dating. Unless she wants a go at you. Which, I think I can have a bit of a say in the matter.”

Komaeda stifled a giggle, “You’re so hot like this. We should talk to Yoshizawa-san now. Otherwise it will look like we targeted her.”

“Okay.” Hajime agreed, “But, if I hear another comment about your date-ability status I can’t promise anything.”
“I thought Kuzuryuu said to behave.”

“He said we can have fun in the circumstances.” Hajime defended himself.

Komaeda’s mouth twitched and his eyes sparkled.

Saionji’s performance was stunning, just like the last one. Hajime couldn’t look away from her twirls and her gracefully snap of her arms and fan. When the routine ended, he was on his feet, clapping with everyone.

“Well that was another wonderful performance.” Pekoyama smiled, “Let’s go to the reception. Do try to behave.” She gave a look at Hajime.

“I was just having fun in the circumstances.” Hajime parroted, “But sure, I’ll be good.”

The food this time was a light lunch. Hajime snatched up a couple of sandwiches, and a roll before standing beside Souda, once again leaning against the wall by the stage. Soon Saionji would give her welcome speech and the afternoon was practically done.

“Hey, Hajime.” Souda muttered.

“Yes?” Hajime picked up one of the sandwiches.

“Good job.” Souda raised his hand, indicating he wanted a high five.

Hajime stifled a laugh and looked around. Pekoyama had her back turned. He high fived Souda and refocused on eating. He was about done his sandwich when Sonia appeared, followed by Kuzuryuu.

“Hajime,” Kuzuryuu spoke immediately, “As someone who looks like I’m your boss I’m grieving over the headaches I’m going to endure.”

“Sorry…” Hajime winced.

“But as your friend I’m high fiving you mentally. I’m not risking Peko seeing it.” Kuzuryuu concluded.

“I think that was touching.” Sonia firmly said, “In my country if you love someone and it’s challenged like that, you demonstrate your bond!”

Demonstrate their bond, huh? Hajime bit into his roll. People milled about and their gazes still dropped onto him. He was thankful for the wall and his friends. Soon everyone gathered around, drawing more stares in their direction. The gazes dropped however, when a moment later Saionji walked into the room, her kimono once again changed. Koizumi walked in with her, stepping to the side, camera ready.

“Good afternoon everyone.” Saionji reached the podium, “I hope you’re all enjoying yourselves.” She gestured to the room, “I’ve been working diligently on this routine for the past few months. To share it with you, has been a true honour.”

Saionji took a deep breath, “I’d also like to once again thank the staff here. Without their hard work, this reception and show wouldn’t have been possible.” She then turned her gaze to Koizumi, “And to my lovely Mahiru, who continually supports me, both in taking pictures of this event as well as always being here for me.”
“So, please, enjoy the afternoon. Enjoy the reception and I look forward to the next show.” She bowed.

Everyone clapped. Saionji stepped away from the podium and some pictures started. Hajime returned his attention to finishing off his food. By the time, he finished Saionji had wobbled over with Koizumi in tow.

“I heard you made Kuroda-san a bit upset.” Saionji immediately said, nudging Hajime in the side.

“You heard?” Hajime asked, “How?”

“The staff were talking behind stage.” Saionji smugly replied, “Kuroda-san donates a lot to the theatre.”

“She was being nosey.” Hajime defended himself.

“Yeah, whatever.” Saionji shrugged, “Anyways you’re free to do what you want now. Oh, though Mahiru wants a picture of us. Let’s do it now!”

Right. Hajime straightened his tie.

“Okay, listen up.” Koizumi started to point, “Let’s stand here…”

Her camera snapped. Hajime felt Komaeda push against his side, an arm sneaking around to hold him along the waist. Looking back at Koizumi, Hajime gave a smile.

The restaurant was well lit as the sun slowly started to sink into the sky. Saionji’s performance hung in the background of their day, making Hajime feel warm inside. After Kuzuryuu dropped them back off at Komaeda’s house, they immediately jumped to Komaeda’s car, driving over to the restaurant. It felt a bit off to walk into a casual place in a suit, but their stomachs didn’t want to wait.

Hajime shut the car door and walked inside with Komaeda. The waiter at the front desk stared a bit and nearly dropped his pen when they walked in. Hajime felt his eyes wander over to his pin. He shifted. Maybe he should have taken that out…

“Table for two please.” Komaeda requested.

“Of course,” He grabbed his pen and marked something down before walking out, arm extended, “Right this way sirs.”

Their table was by a lush floral decoration and the window. Hajime smiled and sat down, grabbing the menu, opening it up.

“Is there anything I can start you two with?” The waiter asked.

“Just some water.” Komaeda replied.

“Very well.”

Hajime skimmed the menu. There were a lot of roasts, stews, and curry. Skimming the menu, he located a stew that came with rice, salad, soup, and a choice of appetizer. Hajime smiled. It didn’t look like a lot and with all the extras, he’d be full.

“Figure out what you want?” Komaeda asked.
“Yes, you?” Hajime looked up.

“I’m looking. I wanted to…” Komaeda paused, “See if that meat on the skewer from last time was actually here or… just our imagination.”

Skewer. Hajime shuddered and remembered why they had come back. If the name of the restaurant was the same… then perhaps they would find Hanamaru…

“Either way, it’s not there.” Komaeda shrugged, “So I’ll go with a curry.”

“Sounds good.” Hajime turned to the server button, “Can I press it? We decided rather quickly.”

“Sure.” Komaeda said, “No sense waiting.”

Hajime pressed the button. A moment passed before their waiter walked back, two glasses of water in his hands.

“Yes, how may I help you?”

“We’re ready to order.” Komaeda replied.

“Okay.” The waiter set the water down and grabbed his notepad.

“Uh… I’ll start first.” Hajime cleared his throat and ordered.

When he was done, the waiter turned to Komaeda, who quickly ordered. He then left with a bow. Hajime pulled his water closer and sipped.

“So, did you enjoy Saionji’s performance?” Hajime asked.

“Yes, I did.” Komaeda smiled, “She’s always so graceful. Though the crowning achievement of the day was making Kuroda-san upset.”

“Will… that pose a problem later?” Hajime inquired, “I mean I don’t regret it, I just am wondering.”

Komaeda shrugged and sipped his water, “She’ll be more flustered about it from a discipline perspective. She won’t intentionally spread gossip, but it will happen. However, since her source is rather dry… it won’t be bad.”

“You don’t like her?” Hajime tilted his head.

“I just think she’s rather keen on the ‘proper thing.’” Komaeda muttered, “But, whether I date a girl or a boy, I don’t think those fall into the proper thing category. She thinks it does. You’re a boy and to top it all off you apparently belong with Kuzuryuu’s Family and you were snarky to her. She’s going to be indigent about this for a while.”

“I’m not sorry.” Hajime replied.

“Don’t be.” Komaeda answered, “This is a good thing. I… don’t want our relationship a secret. I don’t want you think you’re a source of shame. I’m proud to be your boyfriend.”

Hajime’s cheeks burned, “I… I’m proud of our relationship too.” That wasn’t too corny, right?

He was saved when the waiter came back with his appetizer, setting it on the table. “Would you like your salad and soup now, or with the entire meal?”
“Entire please.” Hajime replied, “Thank you.”

The waiter left. Hajime pushed the appetizer to the middle of the table, “We can share.”

“Thank you.” Komaeda reached for his chopsticks.

~

The meal was done, Hajime felt full. Smiling he stacked the dishes up and glanced at the time. It was time to leave. He was too full to consider dessert. Reaching into his pocket, Hajime started to pull his wallet out.

“No, I got this.” Komaeda replied.

“No, I can pay for this.” Hajime argued.

They stared at each other until Komaeda sighed, pocketing his wallet, “Fine. This time.”

“Good.” Hajime stood up, “I wasn’t going to let you win this.”

They walked up to the front. As their waiter was putting in their order, Hajime heard a loud yell and cheer from a table. Turning his head, he saw a bunch of the staff around the table, clapping and cheering.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s a birthday party.” Their waiter informed them, “We do a little song and then the Head Chef, as well as our owner, makes a special cake for them and goes out to give it.”

“I see.” Hajime smiled, “That’s rather lovely.”

“It’s what makes this restaurant a homey place.” The waiter replied, “I really appreciate that.”

Hajime glanced at the screen and quickly pulled out the bills and change, “I should have exact…”

He was about to open his coin section up, when Hajime saw the Head Chef walk past time. He was short, stout, and wore mainly white, except for red, which was the restaurant’s colour scheme. On his head was a small chef’s hat that looked rather cute. As he walked by his gaze dropped onto them.

The room’s temperature shifted. Hajime couldn’t take his eyes off, couldn’t help but see his gaze widen and frame shake a bit, before he quickly walked off, practically going into a run, back into the kitchen. Hajime felt his lungs ache for air. That was… it couldn’t be…

“Um, sir?”

Hajime snapped his attention back and stammered, “S-sorry… that was… seventy-six yen…” He started to pull out the change, his hands shaking as he counted out the coins, “Here.”

“Thank you, sir. Would you like the receipt?”

“Sure…” Hajime absentmindedly answered, turning his gaze to the kitchen doors. That was…

Pocketing the change, Hajime walked out with Komaeda, his heart thumping. If that was Hanamura… and he saw them… that look, the shaking… it couldn’t be a coincidence…

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Komaeda asked.
“Yes.” Hajime quietly replied. “I’ll… send a message to everyone…” He rubbed his hand in his hair, “Don’t we have enough with Tsumiki and Tanaka? Now… potentially Hanamura?”

“Well judging from his reaction, he knows something, so that makes it easier.” Komaeda muttered. “We’ll have to check.”

“Right.” Another check at another restaurant. Hajime pulled his phone out.

~

“Another person?” Souda groaned, “And at a restaurant too? Please don’t tell me we’re going to get him fired.”

“He owns the restaurant. I think that’s rather hard.” Hajime replied, “And it was accidental… sort of.”

“Sort of is right.” Koizumi sighed, “Hanamura… that’s the name of the guy guilty in the first trial.”

“Yes…” Mitarai piped up, “It is. But, this is good. Judging from his reaction, he knows something.”

“What though?” Sonia asked politely, “We should figure that out… even though…”

“We’re so full with Tsumiki and Tanaka…” Kuzuryuu muttered, “Maybe we should assign people? Like… if all of us focus on one person that’s not effective.”

“So, we divide the recon up? Like spy work?” Owari asked, “Hell yeah!”

“I think stalker work is more like it…” Souda muttered. “But fine, who do we choose?”

“Well, obviously Mitarai should take care of Tsumiki.” Pekoyama replied, “Have some people help them… personally I want to help you with Tsumiki, if that’s okay?”

“I don’t see why not.” Mitarai replied.

“Excellent. I’m joining Peko.” Kuzuryuu added.

“…no shit…” Saionji muttered.

“I’ll keep working with Tanaka.” Sonia softly said, “Hajime, he’s seen you around too. Perhaps, you’d like to join me?”

Hajime hesitated, “But Hanamura only saw Nagito and me. I don’t know who he was reacting to. I think I should stick to Hanamura with Nagito.”

“That’s…” Sonia wilted a bit, but perked up, “That’s okay. Then perhaps Souda and Koizumi?”

“Sure, that’s fine.” Koizumi nodded, “I can pump the people that I know in the drama club for information.”

“If Mahiru is with Tanaka, I’m with her.” Saionji decided.

“That’s…” Hajime quickly counted. That meant four people were with Tanaka… making the division a bit odd, but not much they could do. “Fine. Then Owari, will you join Nagito and me?”

“Sure Hajiji.” Owari cheered, “Investigating a restaurant sounds like the best.” Her eyes twinkled.
“Right… we’re settled then.” Kuzuryuu confirmed.

~

The city… it was in ruins… just like the other one. Hajime hovered, feeling like gravity didn’t apply to him. He turned his head. Smoke everywhere, ashes, dead bodies… he could smell the putrid smell of decay and gunpowder, mixed with concrete and death. It coated his lungs, killing him slowly with each inhale and exhale.

What was this? Hajime tried to find a clue, but all he could see was destruction everywhere. What caused the world to end up like this? Was this a clue to Ultimate Despair? To why they were in the Neo World Program? How did they… fit into all of this?

Suddenly Hajime felt a cold hand wrap around his wrist. He whipped his head around and saw Kamukura. Hajime tried to pull his wrist out of the other’s grasp, but it was impossible.

Kamukura leaned closer to him, until their foreheads were touching. “Why… can’t I get rid of you?” He muttered.

Rid of him? What did he mean?

Hajime didn’t have the time to ask. Kamukura pulled him and Hajime fell into Kamukura’s, sinking in, unable to move, as he was slowly being absorbed. Hajime wanted to scream, but everything was paralyzed.

~

Hajime’s back was sweaty and throat dry. The Kamukura’s words played on loop in Hajime’s mind, complete with the backdrop of the destroyed city. Curling his legs close to his chest, Hajime glanced over at the empty space in his bed. Not having Komaeda with him was turning out to be… difficult. It almost felt wrong to be alone. Hajime closed his eyes. The Project burned in his mind, like a small red poker. The details were fuzzy, but seeing Kamukura left Hajime’s heart a bit twisted. Why was he seeing him? Was it because he had, through twisted science, became Kamukura?

“Twisted science…” Hajime dryly chuckled.

It felt like a sci-fi trope. Stretching his legs, Hajime glanced at the clock. It was still a bit too early to be up. Flopping into his pillow, Hajime shut his eyes. Later. He’d draw the scene later.

~

Komaeda’s place was warm and Hajime felt a bit of jealousy hit him. The cold was slowly seeping into the air and central heating felt like a luxury out of his reach and in foreign countries. Hajime’s mind flashed to his heater at home and sighed. His place would be cold when he returned…

“Can’t I just stay at your place for the winter?” Hajime dryly asked. “You have central heating in the main parts of this house.”

Komaeda laughed, “Sure. I don’t mind.”

Hajime felt his cheeks burn, “I… was kidding… I wouldn’t want to impose…”

Komaeda set the top of the table on his kotatsu and raised an eyebrow. The sleeves to his sweater were rolled up and his hair tied back. Hajime couldn’t help but stare a bit. Komaeda couldn’t mean that… for one thing Hajime couldn’t just leave his place for about three months and live with
Komaeda. Wasn’t that too much?

“I mean it.” Komaeda huffed when their silence stretched on, “You’re welcome to stay at my place. Heaters are costly and I don’t like the idea of you freezing in your house.”

Why did Hajime have to blurt that out? His cheeks were on fire. He looked down, fiddling with his shirt. It would be imposing… and assuming Komaeda had to take care of him… that he couldn’t deal with cold for a few months.

“It’s fine…” Hajime muttered, “I was just kidding…”

“I wasn’t.” Komaeda cut him off, “I mean you don’t have to stay with me the entire time… but you are welcome to come over here.”

The sincerity of Komaeda’s offer rang in the room. Hajime ducked his head. He… had dug himself into the hole, but maybe… it wasn’t too bad. A smile tugged on his lips as he walked over to the kotatsu, plugging it in.

“I’ll… think about it.”

“Please do.” Komaeda urged, “Also, please stay the night with me? June saw you and I don’t think you’re getting out of supper, so you might as well stay.”

Hajime laughed and saw Komaeda shuffle with a grin, “Well played Nagito… fine. I’ll stay the night.”

~

Hajime was sinking. There was no air around him, yet he felt no urge to breathe. Everything was just… there… floating in a void. He was supposed to do something… but what was it? He couldn’t move anything. Couldn’t move his hand, let alone a finger. All he wanted to do was sink, to fall and not move. His eyelids barely twitched as Hajime felt his mind shut down. Sleep. That’s what he needed… right? Just… sleep…

~

Kamukura woke and sat up. The room was pristine, spacious, and he was only in a shirt and boxers. Something shifted at his side. He glanced over. Komaeda lay there, hair auburn and both arms intact. Kamukura blinked. Where was he? He closed his eyes… wait… he was in… Komaeda’s house?

Smoothly he moved over and touched Komaeda’s face with the back of his hand. No hair fell as he moved and his head felt light. Odd… did he cut it? He didn’t remember that, but it wasn’t important.

Trailing his fingers down, he stopped at Komaeda’s neck. It looked bare without the collar, without the chain Komaeda wore as Servant. Gently Kamukura wrapped his fingers gingerly around his neck, squeezing lightly. Komaeda twitched and Kamukura was about to try a bit harder, when he felt Komaeda slowly wake up under his hand, his breathing breaking the even rhythm.

“Hajime?” Komaeda sleepily asked, “What are you…”

His voice trailed. Kamukura felt his hand sink harder against Komaeda’s neck.

“Hajime?” Komaeda’s voice slowly leaked into urgency, “Is your hand…”

Kamukura’s arm twitched and it flew off Komaeda’s neck. His head started to pound and he gasped,
curling over, head touching his knees. It... burned it burned... he gasped and tried to bat Komaeda away as he moved closer. The room blurred and Kamukura tried to stop the spinning, but he was already spiralling out of control. Everything went dark.

~

Hajime woke sitting up, head against his legs, a headache pounding harshly. He could feel the blood pulse and pump as the room slowly bleed back into existence. Komaeda was at his side, rubbing his shoulder, calling his name. Hajime felt like cotton was shoved between his ears. He forced his head up and felt another rush of blood drain from his head. He gasped as his vision blurred for a moment, but his hearing was clearing up.

“Hajime… Hajime…” Komaeda’s voice was gradually getting louder. “Hey… you… what’s wrong?”

“I… what…” Hajime tried to order his words, “I’m… sitting up…?”

“Yes?” Komaeda’s voice sharply turned, “You woke me up. It’s…” Komaeda paused, “three twenty-one in the morning.”

“What?” Hajime forced himself to look, “I was awake?”

“Yes.” Komaeda rubbed his head, “Your hand… I think it was on my neck…”

His… neck? Hajime paled. He didn’t remember that. “I…”

“Look… it’s too early for this…” Komaeda flopped back down, “Let’s just… sleep. Okay? I must have imagined that.”

“Okay…” Hajime numbly replied and sunk into the bed, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

Komaeda’s breathing evened out easily after that, his body curling towards Hajime’s. He tried to close his eyes, but his hand tingled and his mind restlessly tossed.

Chapter End Notes

Mitarai Ryouta: I decided the Imposter is using Mitarai's full name because I was too lazy to come up with anything else.

Togami: Yes, the Cooperation still exists. I felt it fun to make a side mention.

Mitarai's backstory: I watch a lot of creepy Top ten lists on YouTube and I watched one a couple months ago about people either mysteriously disappearing or showing up... anyways there was one case like that on the list. I found it interesting and perfect for my modern AU Imposter.

Tips: In Japan, tipping at restaurants is not a custom and very foreign to them. Most don't even know it's a thing.

Birthday: I once saw this happen at a restaurant in Japan and was a bit confused until I
figured it out. So... I suppose it's a thing? I've only seen it once.

76 yen: Just to clarify this was only the change. 76 yen is roughly 76 cents. Definitely not for the entire meal.

Central Heating: Most homes in Japan don't have central heating (except in Hokkaido, because you'd die without it). That's why kotatsu exist as well as various kinds of heaters. Most heaters in Japan use kerosene (which sounds very dangerous just typing it out) as it's cheaper than purely electric ones. It's... annoying.
Finally! I finished this! There was a lot to bring together and I hope I did a good job. Some stuff is set up, but some has some pay off. I'm very happy... one less thing for me to worry about knocking down...

Just so everyone knows, my friend is arriving here tomorrow. I'm showing off my prefecture before we go to Tokyo for a bit. I'm not sure how much writing I'll get done while I'm off and about. I hope to do some... but just in case...

As always, feel free to leave a kudos or a comment. Not needed, but always make my day.

Also, Happy Ides of March!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They picked a table closest to the kitchen doors. Hajime leafed through the menu, absentmindedly glancing at the items. Owari was staring intently, eyes darting across the page. Komaeda was stirring his water with a spoon.

The place was quiet, low murmurs and a few people scattered at the tables. The doors to the kitchen opened irregularly, and the front desk was busy writing stuff down, occasionally answering a call. It was the perfect setting for them. Leaning back, Hajime trailed his eyes to the kitchen doors. It wasn’t moving. Perhaps he should order something.

“Want to split a cake?” Komaeda asked, as though he was reading Hajime’s mind, “The slices look too big.”

“Order two and we all can share.” Owari suggested, “I want the chocolate one.”

“Hajime?” Komaeda looked at him.

“Sure.” Hajime nodded.

Komaeda hit the server button. A moment later a waitress came by, her notepad out, “What can I get you, sir?”

“We want two orders of this chocolate cake.” Komaeda said, “Also three cups of coffee.”

“Okay.” She wrote it down, “I’ll bring those momentarily.”

Komaeda thanked her and turned his gaze to the kitchen. Hajime watched as well, but they barely saw a sliver of the kitchen. Perhaps when she came back. Owari was still shifting through the menu, though her gaze kept flickering to the door. Silence filled the table as they waited.

Hajime wasn’t sure how long, but the waitress walked out, the doors to the kitchen swinging wide. Hanamura managed to spot the counters and the people walking around, but there was no sign of Hanamura.
“Here you go.” The waitress set the cakes down and three empty coffee mugs, “I’ll be back with the coffee.”

She returned to the kitchen. Again, Hajime didn’t have time to see anything, even when she exited with the coffee pot.

“This cake looks great.” Komaeda suddenly said as she poured them coffee, “Is it made different every day?”

“Oh, yes, it is.” She replied as she poured the coffee, “We switch some of the flavours every week.”

“Ah, that means we can have a date here Hajime.” Komaeda winked before turning to her, “That sounds like a lot of work. Do the owners make the cake?”

“Yes. Hanamura-san always makes the cakes in the morning.” She replied, “Even on their days off, either Hanamura-san’s mother or Hanamura-san himself will make the cakes. I hope you enjoy the cake.” She added.

“We will.” Komaeda smiled, “Tell the Chef that I give my compliments.”

She laughed, “I’ll remember to.”

They waited until she walked away before turning to the cakes. Owari already had a fork out as she began to devour the cake. Komaeda idly took some, chewing slowly.

“This is so good!” Owari cheered, “Good choice! But…” She lowered her voice, “She said she’d remember to give your compliment.”

“Hanamura isn’t here then.” Komaeda concluded.

Hajime nodded, “Or she’s implying he won’t come in until later. However, we can stake this place out all day.”

“She said they switch the flavours every week.” Owari mused, “We can come back here?”

“Sounds like our best bet.” Komaeda flipped the menu open to the desserts and pulled his phone out, “I’m taking a picture. This place advertises online too. We can keep an eye on the menu shifts.”

“Good idea.” Hajime said, “I’ll text everyone and tell what we found.”

Pulling his phone out, Hajime quickly typed a message before pocketing it and taking some of the cake. It was delicious.

~

‘Hanamura wasn’t at the restaurant, but we discovered a pattern to when he’ll cone in next.’ – Hajime

‘Good. We went over with Mitarai to thank Tsumiki in person.’ – Fuyuhiko

‘We managed to convince her to come with us to Tanaka’s performance.’ – Peko

‘That’s great. We can see if the two remember anything. Maybe they’ll trigger something with themselves.’ – Nagito

‘Let’s hope. This dancing around is annoying.’ – Fuyuhiko
Komaeda’s room was the perfect place to paint. Silence filled the room and only Komaeda walked in, and even then, Komaeda didn’t bother him. Hajime could focus, working on his final painting. It felt like forever since he had the chance to work properly and in a warm house.

Adding a block of colour to a section, Hajime leaned back and stared. He only had a bit more to finish. Setting his brush down, Hajime felt warm arms wrap around his shoulders and a warm mug of coffee passed to him. Hajime smiled and leaned into Komaeda, as Komaeda pressed a kiss to Hajime’s forehead.

“You’ve been working hard. Take a break.” Komaeda said.

“Okay.” Hajime brought the coffee to his lips, enjoying the sip, “Thank you.”

“No problem. You’ve painted Pekoyama well.”

“Yes.” Hajime smiled, “The theme this semester is movement. Peko is so graceful when she’s doing kendo. I’m happy to paint her. Maybe I’ll find a way to paint you in the next semester.”

“You mean me not dead, right?” Komaeda dryly asked with a laugh.

“Yes…” Hajime winced, “That’s the plan.”

Komaeda hummed and pressed himself closer to Hajime, “Speaking of plan… I was wondering…” Komaeda swallowed, “Would you like to meet my parents?”

Hajime froze and set his coffee down, “Your… parents?”

“Yes… they’ve been working overseas these past couple of weeks, but they’re returning for the holidays. I was hoping to have you over for dinner to meet them. If you don’t mind.” Komaeda added.

It… Hajime tried to think. He had never dated someone long enough to meet their parents. This… was important to Komaeda. He could do it… but some things needed to be established.

“Will you warn them about me before hand?”

“I’ll mention you’re coming over for supper.” Komaeda replied, “I want to tell them about us in person.”

“Are you sure that’s okay?” Hajime turned a bit, “They won’t… over react?”

“It will be fine.” Komaeda firmly said.

Hajime swallowed. He could do it, if Komaeda was with him it would be fine, “Sure. I’d love that.”

“Thank you, Hajime.” Komaeda breathed lightly and kissed Hajime, slowly, tenderly, “This means a lot to me.”

Hajime pressed another kiss to Komaeda’s lips, a bit longer, a bit deeper, their tongues dancing a bit, before he pulled away and picked his coffee up again. Taking a long sip, he turned back to his painting.
Hajime squeezed between Komaeda and Owari, and made sure he was comfortable, before relaxing. The table in the back of Owari’s work place felt more crowded than before. Still, hopefully they wouldn’t be too long and Hajime wouldn’t have to worry about it.

“I told them to not worry about us, so we won’t be interrupted.” Owari said.

“Good, let’s get this over with.” Koizumi sighed, “I still got photos to develop for my class.”

“Right, we won’t be long.” Sonia nodded, “I’ll go first. We introduced Koizumi to Tanaka.”

“He’s interesting.” Koizumi added, “He has four hamsters on him always.”

“Four hamsters?” Kuzuryuu asked, eyebrow raised.

“I said the same thing.” Souda sighed, “But it’s true. I saw them.”

“They’re very cute.” Sonia firmly added, “Tanaka is very fond of animals.”

Hajime hummed, “I’m sort of sad I didn’t see them when I ran into Tanaka before.”

“Anyways…” Kuzuryuu cleared his throat, “Peko and I went with Mitarai to see Tsumiki. We managed to convince her to come with us to the Improv.”

“We’re hoping that this will trigger something.” Pekoyama softly added.

“Good idea.” Koizumi nodded, “Sometimes it takes the right person to trigger a memory.”

“I guess that leaves us.” Komaeda muttered, “We went to the diner, but didn’t see Hanamura. However, we learned roughly the schedule he comes in at. We’ll have to coordinate it… but I think we’ll have to hold it off for a bit.”

“We will?” Owari looked over.

“Yes.” Komaeda nodded, “Christmas season is starting up, along with New Years. It will be busy. I’m worried we won’t have enough time or opportunity.”

Hajime bit his lip. It was a good point. A place like Hanamura’s restaurant was a family orientated restaurant. Many people would go for a break from cooking. Still, it was sad… they had someone who remembered something and it would have to wait…

“We could try the mornings.” Sonia suggested, “When there are less people.”

“True.” Hajime muttered, “We can try in the morning if we wake up early enough?” He looked at Komaeda and Owari.

Komaeda nodded, “We’ll be fine, but you Owari?”

In the corner Souda coughed and Hajime saw Koizumi elbow him. Hajime ignored them.

“I can wake up early.” She cheered, pumping her fist, “Let me know when!”

“Then that’s settled.” Pekoyama concluded, “Anything else?”

“Don’t forget about Tanaka’s performance!” Sonia said with a smile, “Also, they’re having a bit of
an after party in the hall. Everyone is welcome. It will be a good time to talk to Tanaka and Tsumiki.”

Hajime nodded. Everything was slowly working together at the performance. Hopefully, something would come out of it.

~

The theater was crowded. Hajime squeezed into a row, giving an apologetic hand wave to a couple when he ran into their knees. Stumbling forward Hajime located a set of four empty seats. Sitting down at the furthest one, he watched Komaeda, Souda, and Sonia make their way through. Komaeda immediately sat beside him, their shoulders touching, while Sonia and Souda sat beside each other. Hajime glanced around. The place was filling up rather quickly. There were many people, walking down the sides, picking seats. On the stage were people testing microphones and the lights. People were flitting around. The energy seeped into the walls, into the area, and Hajime felt a smile fill his face.

“It’s busier than last time.” Sonia commented, glancing around.

“I think it’s because this is Improv and the Drama club.” Komaeda muttered as he sat down, waving the pamphlet.

“Right.” Souda fished his out, “The Drama club is giving a sneak peek of their big spring musical.”

“I hope everyone else comes here soon.” Hajime pulled his phone out, “We don’t want to be those people saving an entire row.”

“It’s fine.” Souda tapped Hajime’s arm, “I see them.”

Hajime turned to see Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama walk down the aisle towards them. Behind them Mitarai walked with Tsumiki in tow. Hajime gave a wave. Tsumiki’s hair was growing out and she had a distinct lack of bandages on her. There was also a warm glow to her face. She looked happier. Finally, trailing a distance away, was Saionji and Koizumi.

“Hello.” Mitarai said, as they walked down to the next row down, “We’ll sit in front of you.”

“H-Hello…” Tsumiki waved, “T-Thank you for inviting me.”

“It’s not a problem.” Sonia smiled and reached out, “I’m Sonia Nevermind.”

“Oh…” Tsumiki straightened up and proceeded to shake her hand and bow at the same time, “I’m Tsumiki Mikan. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nevermind-san.”

“Just Sonia is fine.” She smiled and sat down.

Souda leaned in, grinning, “And I’m Souda Kazuichi.” Nice to meet you.”

“It’s not a problem.” Sonia smiled and reached out, “I’m Sonia Nevermind.”

“Oh…” Tsumiki straightened up and proceeded to shake her hand and bow at the same time, “I’m Tsumiki Mikan. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nevermind-san.”

“Just Sonia is fine.” She smiled and sat down.

Souda leaned in, grinning, “And I’m Souda Kazuichi.” Nice to meet you.”

“N-Nice to meet you too.” Tsumiki said as she sat down in front of Hajime.

Hajime gently leaned forward and tapped Tsumiki on the shoulder. She turned and he waved, smiling.

“Hello Tsumiki. How have you been?”

“I’ve been good H-Hinata-san…” She stumbled, “H-How are you?”
“Just Hinata is fine.” Hajime said with a smile, “And I’ve been good. Busy with school.”

“R-Right.” Tsumiki nodded, “Art, right?”

“Yes.” Hajime said, “Final projects, but those are almost done.”

“I-I hope it goes well.” Tsumiki said with a small smile. “Y-You have a lot of friends here today.”

Hajime looked over. Koizumi and Saionji were sitting beside Sonia, far away from Tsumiki. Hajime held back a sigh. Of course, he didn’t blame them, but… they weren’t giving her a fair chance. Thankfully, Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama were heading over to sit beside Tsumiki.

“Uh, yes I do.” Hajime answered her, “It’s a chance for us to have a break.” And to test her memory, but Hajime wasn’t going to say that. “I think Fuyuhiko and Peko are going to sit beside you.”

Tsumiki nearly jumped out of her seat and turned in time to see Pekoyama sit beside her, Kuzuryuu sitting beside Pekoyama.

“Hello Tsumiki.” Pekoyama said, “We’re glad you could make it.”

Hajime let their conversation start. He turned to Mitarai and tapped them on the shoulder, “Hey, it’s nice to see you.”

“Like wise Hinata.” Mitarai replied, “Let’s enjoy this performance, shall we?” Their gaze darted towards Tsumiki slightly.

Right. Hajime gave a small nod, “I’m sure something good will come out of this.” He softly said.

“Let’s hope.” Mitarai said, tone light.

The place began to dim. Hajime sat back and felt Komaeda wrap his arm around his shoulders. Hajime sunk into Komaeda, smiling when they snuggled a bit closer.

“Mitarai says they mentioned Tanaka to Tsumiki on the way.” Komaeda said gently in Hajime’s ear, “Nothing, but let’s see how she reacts when she sees Tanaka in person.”

“Okay.” Hajime’s eyes darted to Tsumiki. Sure, he couldn’t see much, but with Mitarai, Pekoyama, and Kuzuryuu close, someone would catch something.

The spot lights illuminated the stage. A girl walked out, with a microphone. She waved and smiled.

“Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for coming to our performance. Today we’re dividing everything into two sections. First, the drama club will give a preview of the spring musical. To everyone who’s come to see our winter performance, thank you! We hope you enjoy our spring production just as much.”

She cleared her throat, “Next, the Improv groups will do their skits. We have three talented groups here today. They’ll be doing one skit per group. We thank you again for coming to see us, and please, enjoy the performances.”

Everyone clapped and the lights dimmed again. Some movement on stage occurred and the lights came back on. A simple backdrop and table decorated the scene. The scene was set. Hajime watched as the drama club did their scene, earning many laughs and smiles. The story looked like a light, happy one. Maybe, if they were free Hajime would suggest to Komaeda to go see the play…

The scene ended before he knew it. Hajime clapped with everyone as the performers all came back
on stage to bow and walk off. A moment of lull occurred as the props were moved. Hajime turned to Komaeda, fishing for the pamphlet out of Komaeda’s jacket.

“Digging around in my clothes?” Komaeda muttered, “Save that for later Hajime.”

Hajime poked him and opened the pamphlet, “Tanaka’s group is first. Let’s see if something happens with Tsumiki.”

The lights dimmed, signalling the performance was going to begin. Hajime clapped with everyone as the lights came back on. As Tanaka and the other performers walked on, Hajime glanced at Tsumiki. Of course, it was difficult to see if she was reacting, but it looked fine.

Sitting back, Hajime listened as they explained the rules of their scene, how if one of the performers said “freeze” they would swap out and the scene would change depending on the person. They began and Hajime watched as it started simple, two friends talking about a fishing trip. The scene soon devolved and Hajime felt himself laugh as it flipped between going to a fish market and an abandoned cabin in the woods, to finally getting on the boat.

The two performers were talking, when Tanaka suddenly called out to freeze them. Hajime leaned closer and watched as Tanaka took over and immediately stumbled and yelled, like they were crashing.

“W-what happened?” The other performer gasped out.

“It appears, we’re stranded.” Tanaka firmly replied, his calmness almost hilarious, “On an island.”

“An… island?”

“I think it’s deserted.” Tanaka said, “It appears destiny has brought us here simply to perish from starvation.” His tone was dry.

Laughter rang in the theater, but Hajime swallowed. An island… a deserted island…starvation… he glanced at Tsumiki, but couldn’t tell anything. The scene progressed normally, until another performer called out freeze. They swapped, leaving Tanaka still in the scene.

“Oh, my god a movie theater!” They tugged Tanaka’s arm.

It… Hajime stopped looking at the stage and looked at Tsumiki. She… looked still… probably engrossed with the performance… but this… was feeling uncomfortable… was this all a coincidence?

“No, mortal!” Tanaka’s voice suddenly rang out, “That movie theater is an illusion cast by the evil deities of this island. It’s a temptation to lure us into their abode before devouring us whole!”

The audience was laughing, but Hajime couldn’t look away from Tsumiki. Her shoulders weren’t moving and she wasn’t laughing.

“Tanaka…” the other said cautiously, “They’re showing…” they paused like they were reading a sign, “Classic movies… like *Gone with the Wind*… *The Sound of Music*… *The Wizard of Oz*…”

The mundane titles to the movies were hilarious, but Hajime felt his heart stop at the mention of the last one. *The Wizard of Oz*… it was an old movie… a foreign one too, all of them. He had never really seen it, so why was his breath stopping?

Suddenly he saw Tsumiki stand up, her shoulders shaking. Mitarai and Pekoyama immediately
glanced at her, Mitarai slowly getting up too, but Tsumiki bolted, mumbling something inaudible to
Pekoyama and Kuzuryuu, before silently heading out of the theater.

Hajime stared. That… was a reaction to something… but… was it possible it was a dream? There
was a movie theater on the island… was it connected? His thoughts were broken when he saw
Mitarai get up and follow Tsumiki. Hajime glanced at Komaeda. Should he…?

“Go,” Komaeda whispered, “We can’t all leave; that will look strange.”

“Right.” Hajime slowly got up, keeping low, and darted out of the theater.

The bright light blinded him as Hajime’s eyes adjusted to the increase of light. Glancing around he
spotted Mitarai standing by the bathrooms. Tsumiki must have gone inside…

“Mitarai!” Hajime called out.

They turned, “Tsumiki went into the washroom.”

“Yeah…” Hajime rubbed his head. Despite no one around he didn’t want to walk into the woman’s
washroom. It felt like an invasion of a personal space.

“I’ll go see what’s wrong.” Mitarai calmly said and walked into the woman’s washroom.

Hajime gaped and stared. Did they… he shook his head and walked closer. The entrance to the
washrooms curled, having no doors in between. Hajime would at least be able to hear them.

“M-Mitarai!” Tsumiki’s voice echoed on the tiles.

“You left suddenly. We were worried. Hinata is outside too.” Mitarai said, “Why don’t you come
out?”

“I… I’m fine.” Tsumiki’s voice shakily came out, “I…I’m sorry! Please, go back and e-enjoy the
performances.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone if you’re upset.” Mitarai firmly replied, “Please, could you tell me
what’s wrong?”

“I… just felt ill.” Tsumiki said, “M-My stomach and head hurt… it’s n-nothing.”

Her head? Hajime bit his lip. Was that an indication she remembered something? He wanted to get
closer, but Hajime’s mind protested.

“Okay…” Mitarai softly said, “If you say so… Hinata and I will go back to the performances…”

“T-thank you…”

Hajime took a few big steps away from the washrooms and watched Mitarai walk out. They walked
towards him, brow furrowed.

“I take it you were listening?”

“Yes.” Hajime muttered, “There was a movie theater on the island…”

“So, you think… she remembered something?” Mitarai asked.

“It’s a bit too early to confirm… but I think… maybe? Something had to trigger her reaction… but
what?” Hajime inquired, “The movie theater? The movie titles?”

“Whatever it was… I think she had something…” Mitarai said firmly, “I’ll wait a bit. Go back inside and tell the others.”

“Right.” Hajime nodded.

He walked back in just as the second group was in the middle of their skit. Carefully, Hajime walked back to his seat. Immediately he felt everyone’s eyes on him, but it was obvious with Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama, who turned around. Hajime leaned over.

“Her stomach and head hurt… I think she was reacting to the movie theater or the movie titles.” Hajime softly said.

“That makes sense.” Pekoyama said with a nod, “But nothing concrete?”

“Sorry.” Hajime sat back up.

Komaeda leaned closer. Hajime immediately told him. After he finished, Hajime saw Komaeda’s brow furrow.

“I… I think it’s the movie title… I… just feel it…” He bit his lip, “I can’t remember what was playing though… just that it was terrible.”

“We’ll figure that out later.” Hajime said, “Right now… let’s enjoy this.”

“Okay.” Komaeda smiled.

~

Stretching, Hajime walked out of the theatre and glanced over at the washrooms. There was no sign of Mitarai or Tsumiki. Even though Mitarai said they’d return, they didn’t, meaning they were with Tsumiki. Hajime pulled his phone out. No message from Mitarai, so they had to still be at the theatre with Tsumiki. Pocketing his phone, Hajime walked into the small reception area.

There were a few dishes, most looked homemade, and some drinks on another table. Along the wall, he spotted Mitarai and Tsumiki. Good. No one had left. Hajime grabbed a cookie and a glass of juice. Carefully he walked over to them.

“Hey Tsumiki.” Hajime greeted, “Are you feeling better?”

She glanced up and nodded, “I-I’m good. S-sorry for r-running out…”

“It’s fine.” Hajime assured her, “I’m just glad you’re feeling all right. Say, why don’t you go introduce yourself to the rest of my friends?” He offered his hand, “Come, I’ll join you.”

Tsumiki blushed and shakily grabbed his hand. Hajime hoisted her up and looked around the room. Owari was chatting with Pekoyama, Souda was flitting around the table with Komaeda, Sonia was already talking to Tanaka, and Koizumi was with Saionji. He swallowed. Making Tsumiki meet Saionji wasn’t going to be pleasant, but it was necessary. Anyone could get a memory triggered in Tsumiki and while one with Saionji wasn’t ideal, it would be something.

Pulling her over, Hajime headed to Saionji and Koizumi. Best get the colder reception out of the way. Saionji immediately stopped talking and shot Hajime a look. Hajime resisted the urge to cringe. She came knowing she’d see Tsumiki.
“Hello…” Hajime tried.

“Hey Hinata.” Koizumi offered with a bit of a smile. Hajime saw her discreetly rub Saionji’s back.

“This is Mitarai’s friend.” Hajime opened the conversation.

“H-Hello…” Tsumiki twisted her shirt, “I-I’m Tsumiki Mikan…”

Koizumi’s mouth twitched, “I’m Koizumi Mahiru.” She said with a neutral tone.

“N-Nice to meet you…”

“Same here.” Koizumi replied briefly, “And this is my girlfriend, Saionji Hiyoko.”

Saionji turned her head, “Hi.”

“H-Hello…” Tsumiki said again, adding a bow.

“Mitarai has mentioned you.” Koizumi said, “I’m glad you could make it.”

Hajime could sense the closure. It… wasn’t the worse. Gently he touched Tsumiki’s shoulder, “I’m going to introduce her to the rest.”

Walking away from them, Hajime located Souda, talking with Komaeda, tucked into a corner, Sonia was still with Tanaka. He’d save her for last.

“Hajime!” Souda waved, “And Tsumiki! Hello!”

“H-Hello… Souda-san…”

“Just… Souda…” He corrected, “Are you feeling all right? You left the performance suddenly.”

Tsumiki blushed, “I-I’m good. Thank you.”

“Shame you felt ill.” Komaeda said, “The performances were great. Still, did you enjoy yourself?”

“Yes.” Tsumiki nodded, “It’s really nice. I-I’ve never really gone to events like this.”

“They’re quite frequent.” Komaeda pointed out, “Maybe you’ll decide to see another one?”

“M-Maybe…” Tsumiki muttered.

“We only recently started to see these.” Hajime told her, “Nagito and I have gone a couple of times, but this time we went because Sonia knows Tanaka.” Hajime pointed him out.

Tsumiki followed his gesture and looked at Tanaka. Hajime carefully eyed her. She didn’t look any different, but that meant nothing.

“I-I see…” Tsumiki smiled.

Hajime tried to find another topic, but it came to them. Owari walked over and lay her arm heavily around his shoulder, laughing, “Hey Hajiji.” She turned to Tsumiki, “Hello, I’m Owari Akane.”

“H-Hello…” Tsumiki stumbled through another introduction.

“Anyways, the food is great.” Owari grinned, “Go get some before it’s all gone.”
“Good idea…” Souda muttered before he walked off.

Tsumiki glanced at the table and back to them, “Uh…”

“It’s fine.” Hajime waved his hand, “We’ll still be here.”

He watched Tsumiki walk over to the table, Mitarai slipping at her side, along with Pekoyama.
Warm arms wrapped around his shoulders and Hajime leaned into Komaeda.

“Anything?” Komaeda asked.

“Besides Saionji and Koizumi being cold to her?” Hajime sighed, “No… so far nothing else…”

“It may take time.” Komaeda muttered, “Let’s go see Tanaka.”

Hajime nodded and turned. Tanaka was still talking with Sonia, the two of them walking over to the table. Hajime pulled Komaeda along, heading over, when Sonia tapped Tsumiki on the shoulder.
She turned, and the two started a conversation, Sonia’s hand gesturing around before pointing to Tanaka.

“…I met Tanaka at an Improv after Hajime and Komaeda suggested it…” Sonia’s voice was within hearing range.

“O-Oh…” Tsumiki bowed, “It’s n-nice to m-meet you. I’m Tsumiki Mikan…”

Tanaka’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second. Hajime paused, causing Komaeda to bump into him. It was there. Something in his eyes. Hajime wanted a better look, but it had vanished an instant later.

“Hajime?” Komaeda peeked over, “Did you see something?”

Hajime nodded and shook his head and refocused on the scene. He couldn’t confirm it, but something had happened. Tanaka had taken Tsumiki’s hand, shaking rather vigorously with both hands clasped around hers.

“Greetings Tsumiki!” Tanaka boisterously said, “I am known as Tanaka Gundham. It is my pleasure to have this meeting the fates have thrust upon us!”

Tsumiki was stammering. Hajime continued his walk over and waited by Sonia’s side until Tanaka finished shaking Tsumiki’s hand. She stumbled a bit and clasped her hands behind her back. Hajime picked the moment to nudge himself in.

“Hello Tanaka.”

Tanaka turned, “Ah, my fellow follower of the arts. I have been informed you were arriving to witness the performances.” Tanaka trailed his eyes over to Komaeda, “Greetings! I am Tanaka Gundham.”

“Hello,” Komaeda waved, “I’m Komaeda Nagito.”

“It seems the Lady Nevermind has many she calls friend.” Tanaka mused.

“I do.” Sonia said with pride colouring her voice.

“Uh… I-I really enjoyed your p-performance…” Tsumiki attempted.
“I thank you! Praise is the only gift a mere player on this stage needs to thrive.” Tanaka turned back to her, “Inform me, which part tickled your fancy?”

Tsumiki twisted her hands. “I… I only saw a bit…” She admitted, “I felt ill around the… movie theater part… I-I’m sorry…”

There it was. Tanaka’s eyes widened a fraction of a second, before returning to normal. Was it a reaction? Hajime wished he could label it as a reaction to a memory, but it could easily be a reflex reaction… there was so little to go on. How did they do this again? Hajime wished he had experience fishing for information, but all the confrontations had been… blunt. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sonia and Komaeda biting their lips, staring at the two of them. Did anyone have anything?

“Such misfortunes occur to everyone.” Tanaka was reassuring Tsumiki, “Illness and disease litter the air where ever we go…”

Tsumiki paled and stepped back. Hajime whipped his head around. Disease. The word smacked Hajime in the head, sticking to his brain like a bright sticky note. The dream with people sick… Komaeda in the hospital… Her hands fell to her side and she was shaking a bit. Hajime wasn’t sure if it was just wishful thinking and him connecting dots where there weren’t any, but at this point, any reaction was a good reaction. Tsumiki’s reaction was mild, but it was more than what Tanaka was giving them.

“I…” Tsumiki stammered, “I-It’s nice meeting you!” She hastily said before dashing out of the hall.

“Uh I’m going to see if Tsumiki is all right.” Hajime hastily said. “It was nice talking to you.”

“Same here.” Komaeda excused himself, “I hope we see each other again.”

Hajime raced to the door, spotting Mitarai already half way out. Exiting, he saw Tsumiki, leaning against the side of the entrance, before trying to wobble over to the bathrooms.

“Mikan.” Mitarai was already half pulling her up, “Are you still feeling ill?”

“Mitarai…” She mumbled, “I-I just had a dizzy spell… I-I d-don’t know why…”

“Tsumiki… would you like me to get you some water?” Hajime asked, making his presence known. She turned a bit, face pale, and nodded, “S-Sorry…”

“I’ll stay here with Mitarai.” Komaeda said.

“All right.” Hajime said before turning back to the reception.

Walking over to the drink table, Hajime was immediately surrounded. He reached for the water, but Pekoyama already had it, pouring into a plastic cup.

“What happened?” Owari asked.

“Tanaka said something about disease and illness and suddenly Tsumiki was dizzy.” Hajime muttered, “I’ll tell the rest later… we look rather conspicuous don’t you think?”

Saionji huffed, “I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t a violent reaction… not like I was worried.”

Right. Hajime didn’t want to call her out on it. Instead he took the water from Pekoyama, “Thank you. Later. I promise.”
He raced out. They had relocated Tsumiki and were sitting on some chairs along a wall. Tsumiki was bent over, head almost between her knees. Mitarai was rubbing her shoulders while Komaeda was muttering something to her. The moment Hajime walked up, Mitarai and Komaeda glanced at him. Kneeling, Hajime pressed the cup against Tsumiki’s leg.

“I brought the water.” Hajime softly said.

Tsumiki didn’t respond. Hajime stood up and looked at Mitarai, who shrugged. Komaeda poked him and Hajime handed the water, moving out of Tsumiki’s personal space, and sat down beside Komaeda.

“Hajime brought you some water.” Komaeda restated, “Whenever you’re ready Tsumiki.”

She groaned and tried to sit up, gasping and wobbling as she did, like a pendulum on a clock. Mitarai’s grasp fell and she bumped into Komaeda, who spluttered as he did his best to keep the water from spilling.

“Mikan…” Mitarai gently reached over, “Maybe we should go home…”

Tsumiki twisted and looked up at Komaeda. Hajime felt his breath escape his lungs. Her eyes… were glazed, like a translucent polish. A sharp exhale passed her lips as her brow furrowed.

“You…” She reached up, “You’re… here?”

Komaeda wasn’t breathing and his position was frozen, “I’ve been here since you arrived at the theatre Tsumiki.”

“You’re… here?” Tsumiki asked again, as though she didn’t hear Komaeda the first time, “S-…”

Her voice cut and Tsumiki wobbled back, nearly smacking Mitarai in the chin. Her eyes shut and she started to exhale and inhale deeply, before she opened her eyes. They were clear. Reaching out with a shaky hand she took the water. Komaeda’s shoulders raised a bit as he breathed.

“You… brought me w-water?” Tsumiki asked.

“No…” Komaeda replied slowly, “Hajime did.”

“He… Ah I d-didn’t s-see you c-come back…” Tsumiki blushed. “T-Thank you… Hinata.”

“You’re welcome…” Hajime numbly said.

She… for a moment… Tsumiki… it was like Sonia and Kuzuryuu… what was that? It couldn’t have been a memory… but it was something. He looked at Mitarai as Tsumiki was drinking the water. Their face was contorted, displaying what Hajime felt internally. Whatever had happened… they had more questions than answers.

~

“And then she drank the water and left with Mitarai.” Hajime finished the story and leaned into Komaeda’s couch.

“It has to be the disease, right?” Souda asked, “Tanaka said something about it and then she acted strange.”

“I agree with Kazuichi.” Kuzuryuu said, “We already have some dreams linked to disease.”
“Despair Disease… apparently, I got it along with Owari.” Komaeda said, “Maybe Tsumiki remembers something about it?”

“Given her reaction I am inclined to think she may have more involvement with it.” Pekoyama said.

“That’s true…” Koizumi muttered, “But I’m more concerned with what happened when you gave the water. She started to say something with an ‘S’ as she looked at Komaeda.”

“Well, obviously, she was about to say ‘Servant’ like Sonia did.” Saionji cut in.

Hajime shivered. He didn’t want to think about it… but Saionji was right. There was a possibility she was… meaning her reaction went beyond a memory or a flash of one. At his side, he saw Sonia visibly stiffen.

“Hey, does anyone know what Tsumiki’s talent was?” Owari piped up.

Her talent? Hajime shook his head. Everyone did too.

“Ok… I was just thinking… a lot of our talents relate to who we are now… if Tsumiki is a nurse…” Owari trailed off.

“Are you suggesting that her involvement with the Despair Disease is on a medical level?” Pekoyama asked, “That’s… a possibility. If we were trapped on an island with no one else around and people got ill… we’d want someone with medical training helping them.”

“I’ll text Mitarai, see if they remember.” Hajime offered.

“Either way… we got something…” Komaeda sighed, “I suppose that’s a good start.”

~

Hajime felt Komaeda snuggle in his arms. The day was over and the questions were piling up. What did Tsumiki remember? Did Tanaka remember something too? What was the connection between the strange behaviour to their dreams?

“You’re thinking loudly.” Komaeda huffed, “You’ll go in circles. We can work at it with everyone else later. Sleep is what we need now.”

Komaeda was right. Hajime pulled him closer and pressed their lips together, languidly, with familiarity. Their positions shifted and Komaeda was on top of him, their kissing getting deeper with each press. Tongues brushed against each other as air was lost between them. Breaking away when the need for oxygen got too overwhelming, Hajime gasped and lightly smacked Komaeda’s shoulder.

“Who said sleep is what we need now?”

“Kisses are good too.” Komaeda defended himself, “One more? For good night?”

“The kiss we just had was good enough for night, morning, and…”

With a roll of his eyes, Komaeda pressed their lips together into another kiss, a bit rougher and intoxicating. Hajime curled his arms around Komaeda and deepened their kiss, sinking into the feeling of warmth pooling in his veins. When they broke apart saliva broke between their lips.

“Greedy.” Hajime accused, “Sleep now. That’s all you’re getting tonight.”
“Fine.” Komaeda fell back into Hajime’s arms, “Next time.”

Next time… Hajime felt a smile tug at his lips before he drifted off into slumber.

~

Komaeda scoffed and rubbed his head, “You’re taking too long. This case is already solved.”

His tone leaked with frustration and anger as he began to sum up the trial rather quickly. Hajime tried to not stare, but he couldn’t help it. What had happened to Komaeda? This was different than trial one, where Komaeda was gleeful over the planning in Togami’s death. Something had happened in the Final Dead Room. Hajime was sure. What had happened, he wasn’t certain and there was no way Komaeda was going to tell him. Hajime’s gut twisted.

~

The trial again. Komaeda’s hostility. Hajime blinked and looked down. Komaeda was still dozing in his arms. It was hard to imagine Komaeda with the level of hostility shown in his dream. What had caused him to act that way? Hajime wiggled his arm from under Komaeda and brushed his bangs. Did it have something to do with learning about Hajime’s Reserve Course Student status?

He shook his head. That couldn’t be all of it. Komaeda had come back to him, confused, still wanting to be with him right up until the warehouse… Hajime thickly swallowed. Whatever it was… he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know.

Reaching over for his phone, Hajime began to make notes on the dream. He was almost finished the note when Komaeda stirred, curling closer to him.

“Good morning Hajime.” Komaeda muttered.

“Good morning Nagito.” Hajime set his phone down, “I had a dream.”

“Oh?” Komaeda asked.

“It was the trial where you were… hostile to us.” Hajime carefully said, “You started to sum up the case, but I was too busy wondering what caused you to act like that.”

“I…” Komaeda’s voice sounded a bit clearer, “I wish I knew… it must have lead to my death… I think.”

“I… think so too.” Hajime quietly agreed.

“Anyways… enough on depressing things.” Komaeda declared, “We’re going to your house.”

Hajime blinked, “We… are?”

“Yes! You can’t just wear my clothes… not that I don’t like that.” Komaeda added quickly, “Plus you’ll want your own stuff here…”

Komaeda’s offer still stood. Hajime nodded. He wasn’t going to argue with him.

~

It was rather cute how Komaeda sort of knew where his stuff was. Hajime watched as Komaeda bustled around, throwing things into a small suitcase laid out on Hajime’s floor. Walking over to his shelf, Hajime grabbed some of his sketchbooks, absentmindedly flipping them open. They had a
break, but that didn’t mean Hajime could stop drawing. Class was all year. Plus, he had dreams to still draw.

The book opened on a random sketch, one with the city destroyed and Kamukura looking over it. Hajime bit his lip and felt his heart twist a bit. Trailing his fingers on the drawing he felt a dull pain in his head. He nearly dropped the book. What… was that? He stared at the drawing again. Nothing. His head didn’t hurt anymore.

“Hajime?” Komaeda’s voice poked into the room, “I’m going to start the car and bring some of the stuff to it.”

Hajime shut the sketchbook. He’d worry about that later. “Okay. Thank you for helping me.”

“No problem.” Komaeda left.

Hajime grabbed his sketchbooks. His head didn’t hurt for the rest of the day.

~

“Wow… so Komaeda asked you to stay over for winter?” Koizumi nodded, “Central heating is a blessing. I’m already geared up to stay with Hiyoko.”

“Pretty sure central heating isn’t the only reason you want to stay.” Saionji gave a grin.

Hajime blushed along with Koizumi. Coughing, Koizumi gave a soft glare to Saionji, who blew a kiss, and tugged both into a shop.

Last minute shopping for presents was a bit stressful, but running into Koizumi and Saionji was pleasant. Hajime shifted his jacket, the sleeve pulled down thanks to Saionji, and looked around. Saionji had dragged them into a grocery store and was already pressing closer to a display of cakes. Along the other side were local specialties, ready to be sold. Hajime saw a few foreigners glance at them, probably for souvenirs. Maybe he could find something for June? Or at the very least, a cup of coffee before he kept looking around. His hands were starting to feel a bit numb.

Walking over to the coffee shop attached to the grocery store, Hajime waited patiently in line. As he did he glanced around. People were milling about, buying things, talking. It was… nice… Hajime was about to turn his head when he spotted someone.

He wasn’t wearing a chef’s clothes, and he was talking with an older woman who was probably his mother. Hajime’s mind derailed. It was… Hanamura… he stared. What should he do? He couldn’t just walk up to them, that would lead to all sorts of situations Hajime didn’t want to be in.

They walked out of the grocery store, turning so they faced him. Hajime’s throat dried up as their eyes met. Hanamura kept walking. Hajime exhaled. He… didn’t recognize him… meaning…

Hajime pulled his phone out and quickly texted Komaeda.

‘Saw Hanamura. He didn’t react to me. I think… he was reacting to you when we saw him at the restaurant.’ – Hajime

He was at the counter. Hajime pocketed his phone and quickly ordered, paid, and stepped aside. Pulling his phone back out, Hajime stared. Komaeda had texted back.

‘Darn… well… at least we know who he was reacting to.’ – Nagito
Grabbing his coffee, Hajime re-located Saionji and Koizumi, who were discussing which cake to buy. As soon as he stepped closer they turned to him.

“Hinata. Tell Mahiru the cake with gummies is the best one.” Saionji jabbed her finger at a white cake with gummy bears on it.

“That’s too much sugar.” Koizumi sighed, “I think we should go with a strawberry shortcake.”

“Gummies.”

“Shortcake.”

They both stared at Hajime. He took a step back. Why… was this happening to him? He quickly thought.

“Buy the shortcake. Get some gummies and put them on top.” Hajime blurted out.

They paused and looked at him, before Koizumi groaned, “Fine. We can compromise.”

“Good!” Saionji beamed, “I’ll go get the gummies.”

Hajime let out a sigh of relief.

~

“Did you have fun?” Komaeda asked as soon as Hajime walked through the door.

“Yeah…” Hajime dusted the light snow off his jacket, “I ran into Koizumi and Saionji. Ended up helping them pick a cake.”

“Sounds like fun.” Komaeda took Hajime’s jacket and pressed a kiss to his lips, “Welcome home.”

Hajime flushed at the phrasing. It was just a simple phrase… one everyone used… but with Komaeda it felt like he was putting some meaning behind it.

“I’m home.” Hajime replied softly.

~

‘You saw Hanamura and didn’t tell us?’ – Koizumi

‘I didn’t want to tell you after the cake battle’ – Hajime

‘Sorry.’ – Hajime

‘Cake battle? You make it sound like Mahiru and I were going to start a food fight.’ – Saionji

‘Is this important?’ – Fuyuhiko

‘What happened next?’ – Sonia

‘He saw me, but didn’t react. I believe he was reacting to Nagito.’ – Hajime

‘We’re making progress! Hell yeah!’ – Owari

‘She’s right. So, Hajime, Owari, feel like getting up early tomorrow?’ – Nagito
The restaurant opened at eight thirty. Hajime rubbed his eyes and glanced over. Komaeda yawned a bit, but Owari looked wide awake, eyes wide, as she bounced over to the table. Everything was still in the restaurant, as though the very air was walking up too.

Opening the menu, Hajime looked. If they were going to be up early with the chance of seeing Hanamura, he at least deserved something to eat. A waiter came by, giving them some water, but other than that the place felt lifeless.

“How are you so energetic?” Komaeda asked Owari, awe painting his tone.

“I go on runs every so often in the morning.” Owari replied, “When I feel like it. Other wise I’m like a couch potato in the morning.”

“This morning you’re not a couch potato?” Komaeda used her wording.

“Yup! I figured one of us has to be alert if something happens.”

As though on cue, the front door opened, light whistling filling the space. Hajime glanced over immediately. Hanamura was strolling in, the source of the whistling coming from him. His gaze started to turn towards them and Hajime saw the moment his eyes widened and his whistling stopped. His gaze was locked on Komaeda. Hajime saw a sweat bead form on his forehead. What was he going to do? Hajime glanced at the kitchen door. He could run to the back and hide…

He turned and ran out the door. Owari immediately bolted up from her seat.

“I got this!” She said, “Get back here!”

Hajime hastily shoved the menu back and stood up, running behind her, Komaeda following. They exited to find Owari, sitting on Hanamura, cross legged. Hajime stared. That… wasn’t what he expected.

“I-I… I mean most men are thrilled to be underneath a woman with such a nice… physique… but this really is too much… I mean…” Hanamura trailed off and stared in horror as Komaeda walked into his vision. “You…”

Komaeda sighed and knelt in a smooth motion, “Judging from your reaction, I think it’s safe to say you remember me?”

Hanamura stammered.

“Sorry about this.” Hajime added, “You ran… we’ve been waiting to speak to you. Think you can give us a few minutes?”

Hanamura looked at him and looked at Komaeda before nodding, “I suppose I don’t have much of a choice?”

“Nope!” Owari chimed.

~

Hanamura sat on the opposite side of Komaeda, Owari sitting at the end of the booth. Hajime sighed. This felt like an interrogation… make sure he doesn’t run…

“Look, we got off to a bad start.” Hajime tried, “Let’s introduce ourselves. I’m Hinata Hajime.”
“I’m Owari Akane.”

“I’m Komaeda Nagito.”

“I… I know…” Hanamura shifted as Komaeda spoke.

“So, you remember me.” Komaeda said, “And judging from your reaction, it’s not good?”

Hanamura squeaked, “You… you set me up.”

Hajime pieced it together. The murder of Mitarai. Hanamura was the killer, but… he glanced at Komaeda. He had gleefully admitted to planning and failing at an attempt. Meaning… somehow Hanamura got involved.

“You’re talking about Mitarai’s murder?” Komaeda asked.

“Mitarai?” Hanamura blinked, “You mean Togami?”

The company? Hajime looked at Owari, who shrugged and looked at Komaeda who leaned forward, frowning.

“Togami?”

“Yes?” Hanamura stared, “Stabbed…. Under the table…” He lowered his voice.

“That’s Mitarai…” Komaeda mused, “But they said they were the Ultimate Imposter… so I take it they weren’t Mitarai in your memory?”

“No?” Hanamura squeaked, “Look, I got cakes to make and stuff to prepare…”

“I know.” Komaeda cut in gently, “I’m sorry, we just want to know what you remember.”

 “…You let me find you setting up the murder.” Hanamura quickly said, “I tried to stop you. Togami got involved and next thing I know, I killed Togami and I’m executed.”

So… Hanamura’s killing of Mitarai was… accidental? He wanted to get Komaeda? Hajime bit his lip. That… made sense… wanting to stop it… but with murder? Hajime shook his head. It didn’t matter. Another piece was solved. He pulled his phone out.

“Uh… what are you doing?” Hanamura asked.

“I’m going to text the others.” Hajime replied, “You’re not the first person we’ve met who remembers the dreams. I think everyone would like to meet you some time soon.”

Chapter End Notes

Hamsters: As if I’d write Tanaka WITHOUT the Four Dark Devas of Destruction...

Improv: I’m terrible at making things funny, especially Improv, which is so spontaneous. Anyways, this scene was more fore getting a reaction out of Tsumiki than to be funny… sorry...

Gone with the Wind/Sound of Music/The Wizard of Oz: All three of these films got
very popular in Japan and basically everyone knows them.

Lady Sonia: I wanted to use something cute for Tanaka to call Sonia, but they aren't close enough yet for adorkable nicknames, so Lady Sonia had to do.

Kissing: God, Komaeda sometimes you're SO demanding...

Summary: This is one of my favourite parts of Trial Four because not only is Komaeda mad at them (which is kind of funny) the added call back to both the Japanese and English voice for him being Naegi in the first game makes me giggle because who always sums up the trials in DR 1??

Cakes: It's tradition in Japan to buy cake for Christmas

Christmas shopping: While Christmas isn't celebrated in Japan like it is in North America (it's considered a romantic holiday) the concept of gift giving is well loved and stores are busy. Plus, it's around New Years, which is a Big Deal in Japan (that's their Family holiday of the year).

Welcome home/I'm home: In Japan they use a sending and greeting for when they come back or go from a place they feel is their home. Komaeda using it for Hajime implies his house is also Hajime's house.

Hanamura: I didn't get to write a lot of him, being his pervy self, but I hope I got some of it down...
Hello!

First, I want to apologize for taking so long with this chapter. I had a lot of fun in Tokyo with my friend, but I got back and was dead creatively in terms of writing. I bought many things in Tokyo and one of those "things" was at least twenty new Copic markers. All I wanted to do when I was at home was draw...

This chapter felt weird to write, considering I'm writing winter stuff in April. That being said, as a small disclaimer, Christmas is the only foreign holiday most of Japan knows exists in December so, they celebrate it. I say celebrate loosely because it's more secular Christmas than religious Christmas.

Anyways, this chapter is extra long, I think the longest I've written for this story. I am sorry I didn't get to Tsumiki or Tanaka as much as I wanted to... at this rate I'm dragging them out oops... I didn't think this holiday/New Years time would be so long... but it was... Next time I will get to them because this dancing around is really aggravating LOL.

Thank you to everyone who sends me comments and kudos. I know I don't say it often, in fear of sounding utterly corny and needy, but comments and kudos really motivate me and make me feel like I'm not wasting my free time XD.

Restaurants always felt a bit off after they closed, like the buzz of the day hadn’t quite disappeared and lingered, making the air feel weird. Hajime glanced around, almost expecting the door to open and a customer to walk in. Or for a staff member to walk out from the back. Nothing. No one else except them and Hanamura.

Hajime looked across the table. Hanamura was squashed between Souda and Owari, fidgeting with his scarf, shoulders tense. It was almost a surprise to see that Hanamura stayed, didn’t run away. Then again, Hajime’s mouth twisted as he turned his head slightly to Komaeda. Perhaps the fear of what would happen to him was influencing this? Hajime winced. They weren’t here to... threaten him. Or make him feel too uncomfortable. It was why Mitarai was absent.

“So, uh, should we introduce ourselves?” Souda asked before turning and doing it anyways, “I’m Souda Kazuichi. You can call me Souda.”

Everyone followed suit. Hajime watched with each passing introduction Hanamura’s posture straighten up, his shoulders slacking. It made Hajime smile. So far, their entire encounter with Hanamura hadn’t been positive. Hopefully, after they cleared things up, it would change.

“Let’s start.” Koizumi suggested, “Not to sound rushed, but it is late. I got a morning class.”

“Right.” Kuzuryuu nodded, “Hajime filled us in a bit.” He spoke to Hanamura, “You only remember Komaeda and Trial One?”
“I remember bits.” Hanamaru spoke, rubbing his chin, “The island… the party…” His voice trailed off. “Though…” He looked at Sonia as he spoke, “Maybe if someone were to… stimulate… my mind… maybe I’d remember more…”

Hajime felt a shudder run down his spine. Saionji vocally choked, like she was trying to rid her tongue of something vile. Souda gaped. Owari gave a cheerful smile and lifted her arm, smacking Hanamura across the shoulders.

“There’s no need for comments like that.” She said rather cheerfully.

“Oh wow… you’re so strong… I mean I knew that when you tackled me this morning…” Was it Hajime’s imagination, or was Hanamura’s voice… floaty?

Pekoyama coughed loudly, drawing everyone’s attention, “Anyways…if that is all Hanamura remembers…” She turned to Hajime, “Have you told him anything else?”

“Sorry no.” Hajime replied, “Hanamura was working today.”

“Then let’s give a summary for now… we’ll have to pick another time to go over in detail.” Pekoyama nodded.

“Detail?” Hanamura perked up, “What kind of detail? From someone like yourself I’m sure I’ll enjoy it.”

Was Hanamura always like this? Hajime wanted to say something but Kuzuryuu’s knuckles cracked loudly. Hajime turned and swore he saw a dark cloud waffle off him. Hanamura immediately flinched and looked down.

“Anyways…” Kuzuryuu nearly growled, “Let’s get this summary over with.”

“Right.” Hajime unlocked his phone, opening his image gallery, “So we’ve all been dreaming about… well the Island and here are the dreams in the best possible time line we have now…”

Hajime began to talk, letting the others jump in and help him along the way. In a way, Hajime felt bad telling Hanamura all the terrible things that occurred after his death, but… everyone needed to be on the same page. It didn’t stop him from wincing as Hanamura’s face began to pale as they explained. The pictures weren’t helping and Hajime felt his muscles relax when he hit the end of the gallery.

“And… that’s all we got…” Hajime muttered.

“I… I see…” Hanamura’s voice was shaky.

“Are you okay?” Sonia asked gently, “Should I get you some water?”

“N-No… though… maybe if everyone gave me a long, hard… hug…”

Kuzuryuu growled. “If that’s all.” His tone suggested it was best to agree, “We’ll pick a time and detail out our memories together.”

He stood up and offered his arm to Pekoyama. Hajime wanted to blink, but she took it immediately, standing up. The gesture was so intimate that Hajime wanted to sigh. Of course, the reason hit him in the head. Shaking the thought away Hajime stood up, tugging on Komaeda’s arm.

“I guess we’re done for tonight?” Hajime offered, “Though… one second…”
Hajime turned to Hanamura, his phone out, “Can I get your number?”


Almost like it was a flash, Komaeda was behind him, curling an arm around Hajime’s waist. Hajime exhaled and felt his face warm and his heart leap. The gesture was unneeded, but at the same time, it was rather nice…

“Oh… right…” Hanamura wilted, pulling out his phone.

Hajime rattled his number off all while Komaeda kept his hand on his waist. When Hanamura pocketed his phone, Komaeda tugged him. Hajime sighed and lifted his hand, curling his fingers around Komaeda’s hand. Slowly he pried his hand off and kept Komaeda’s hand curled in his own.

“Good night everyone.” Hajime said.

“Good night Hajime.” Souda waved and stood up, “I’ll be off too.”

“Wait, I’ll drive you and Owari back.” Sonia stood up.

“Finally.” Saionji sighed tugging on Koizumi’s arm, “Let’s go!”

Koizumi stumbled up, “Right. See you later. Have a good evening.”

Looking at Hanamura, who was still sitting at the table, Hajime gave another wave in his direction. Komaeda’s hand tightened around his, but Hajime paid no mind. Wishing a proper farewell to Hanamura, Hajime let Komaeda drag him outside to his car.

“That was informative.” Hajime said as he sat inside.

“Right.” Komaeda muttered, starting the car.

Hajime looked at him. His hand was twitching against the wheel and his face a bit flushed. Biting his lip Hajime gently leaned a bit closer and touched Komaeda’s shoulder.

“It was just harmless flirting.” Hajime said.

“I know.” Komaeda started to drive, “I just…it grated me. Sorry… I shouldn’t have…”

Hajime looked down. Sure, Komaeda had touched his waist and generally kept proximity once Hanamaru flirted with him but… it wasn’t too bad. Hajime could still feel the warmth of Komaeda’s hand on his waist and on his hand.

“It’s fine.” Hajime muttered, “I mean… I didn’t mind it. I suppose.”

Komaeda let out a small laugh, “I still apologize. You’re not just my boyfriend you’re also my friend. I don’t need to be protective.”

“That’s true… but it is fine. Let’s go home, okay?”

Home. As soon as Hajime said that he felt his cheeks warm. Did he just call Komaeda’s house his home too? Komaeda picked it up. His eyes widened and the car sped up a bit too fast. A dusting of pink filled his face as he smiled, staring out on the road.

“Yes… let’s go home.”
Hajime woke to Komaeda turning a bit, his arms tightening around his middle. Gasping at the slight lack of air, Hajime wiggled his arm out and curled it around Komaeda’s head, rubbing his hair. Was Komaeda remembering something? Hajime’s hand travelled down, to Komaeda’s shoulders. Slowly Hajime rubbed, wincing when Komaeda’s arms tightened more.

“Nagito…” Hajime softly said, “It’s fine. It’s just a dream…” He lightly shook Komaeda’s shoulder.

The reaction was instant. Komaeda’s eyes opened and he jolted so suddenly he nearly headbutted Hajime. With a long, jagged exhale Komaeda curled closer to Hajime, pulling himself into Hajime’s embrace. Continuing to stroke his shoulders comfortingly, Hajime waited until Komaeda’s breathing started to even out.

“I’m here Nagito. It’s fine.” Hajime gently whispered.

“H-Hajime…” Komaeda’s hands curled into Hajime’s shirt, “S-sorry… did I wake you?”

“It’s fine.” Hajime immediately responded, “It’s…” He tried to sit up to look.

“Too early.” Komaeda finished, “I know… I set an alarm. Do you want me to tell you about my dream now or?”

As appealing as it was to say later, if he did Komaeda might forget, “Best do it now.” Hajime replied.

“Okay…” Komaeda sighed. “I was in a school. It was empty and a bit destroyed, but I went down, down an elevator… and to a room.”

He exhaled, “It looked like a classroom with desks. But there was a big conveyor belt down the middle of the room. It led to a… crushing machine. There was so much blood. I walked over. Under the machine was an arm, sticking out, dead.”

A dead arm? Hajime felt his mind tingle. This sounded familiar. A ball was forming in his stomach, knotting, and twisting like knobs of an old tree.

“I had a hack saw in my hand.” Komaeda continued, “I began to work, cutting the arm off the corpse. It was easy…”

He swallowed thickly. “The dream shifted. I was in a nurse’s office. I sanitized everything as well as I could. I had the blood cut off from my left arm. I… picked the hack saw up…”

Komaeda didn’t have to finish the sentence. Hajime felt him clutch his shirt tightly. The image danced in his mind; Hajime didn’t have to close his eyes to see it. His memory had jolted, remembering a dream he had a long time ago… of seeing Komaeda on a ship with a woman’s arm instead of his own.

He exhaled sharply. This dream was… the lead up to it… to Komaeda having the woman’s arm… the one he sewed on himself…

Hajime rubbed Komaeda’s shoulders again, feeling the warmth from Komaeda’s sleep riddled body seep into his. Glancing at the clock Hajime winced. Komaeda wasn’t wrong when he said it was early. Going to his morning class was going to be a challenge.

“Nagito… it’s fine now…” Hajime’s words felt a bit hollow, but he didn’t want to remain silent,
“Your arm is fine. This was just a dream.”

“Y-yeah… thanks Hajime…” Komaeda sucked in a breath, “Y-you’re right… sorry…” He closed his eyes, “Just… can we stay like this?”

There was no way Hajime would say no. He simply pulled Komaeda closer and wiggled so they were lying back down. Half of Komaeda was on his chest, pressing a bit uncomfortably, but it was fine. Hajime shifted, readjusting a little and unwrapped an arm to pull the covers over them. One they were decently covered Hajime closed his eyes.

Sleep came slowly, trickling in along with Komaeda’s barely audible breathing.

~

“You’re going to see Hanamura?” Mitarai asked.

Hajime shifted his phone and nodded before remembering Mitarai couldn’t see, “Yes, we are. Do you… want to come?”

There was barely a pause, “No. Not that I don’t want to see him or don’t forgive him… just you saw how he reacted to Komaeda. I am afraid what will happen if he sees me suddenly.”

“Okay.” Hajime agreed, “We’ll see what Hanamura thinks about seeing you. He’ll have to do it eventually.”

“Right.” Mitarai said, “Though it might be easy. I don’t look like Togami. I’m only the Imposter by memory. Nothing else.”

“Good point.” Hajime shifted his phone again and picked up his paint brush.

“I’ll leave you to your afternoon.” Mitarai politely said, “Good luck tonight. Let me know what happens.”

“Okay. Good bye.” Hajime replied before hanging up.

~

Meeting at Hanamura’s restaurant was the best location. Hajime carefully shuffled in, Komaeda following. People were still there, eating and chatting. Pulling his phone out Hajime rechecked the time. This was around the time for them to meet Hanamura.

“For how many people?” A waitress walked up.

Hajime nearly jumped. Komaeda cut in, “We’re a part of a rather large group…”

“Oh, okay… I’ll just give you a booth…”

She led them to a booth in a corner, that wrapped around. Hajime sat and shuffled in, Komaeda following. After she left them, Hajime set his sketchbook on the table, leafing through it. There were so many sketches, so many dreams. Would the dreams ever end? Hajime paused. He had never really thought of it. What happened when they found everyone in their dreams and pieced together the story? Would the dreams just end?

“Hajime, they’re coming. Let’s move in a bit more.” Komaeda tapped his shoulder.

“Right.” Hajime shuffled inward.
Souda and Owari bounced over, Souda slipping in, sitting at Hajime’s other side. “Hey friend.”

“Hey Kazuichi.” Hajime bumped shoulders as Komaeda moved in, accidentally pushing into him.

Pekoyama and Kuzuryuu sat down next, followed by Sonia, who was chatting with Koizumi. Saionji tugged her arm and Koizumi nearly fell into the booth in the middle of her conversation with Sonia. Flailing a bit, Koizumi gave Saionji a pat on the shoulders and sat down. Sonia followed, sitting beside Koizumi.

The waitress came by again, pouring glasses of water for everyone. Hajime took the time to look at the restaurant. People were lingering though many were filing out. The waitress herself was glancing at the clock, biting her lip. Hajime felt his heart jolt. She was probably wondering why such a big group was coming in so close to the closing time.

“Uh… don’t worry about us.” Hajime spoke to her, “We’re here to see Hanamura-san. We’re friends of his.”

“Oh…” Her cheeks warmed, “I see… should I tell him you’re here?”

“No need,” Pekoyama replied calmly, “We set up a time to meet him.”

As though on queue, Hanamura walked up. His chef’s hat wasn’t present, but his apron was still on and his red scarf. He smoothed his hair and smiled at the waitress.

“Don’t worry about this Ayame. I got it. You can go home. Rest up. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He smoothly said with a wink.

“Uh… thank you boss.” Ayame replied, “Good night.” She bid before leaving.

“Sorry if I’m a bit late.” Hanamura said as he moved to sit between Koizumi and Sonia.

The two of them batted him away, hands on his shoulders. Pekoyama raised her eyebrow and gestured over to Souda.

“You can sit beside Souda.”

Souda cringed and Hajime wanted to reach over and pat his shoulder. Hanamura deflated a bit, but moved, wiggling a bit too much to get in. Souda shuddered and looked like he was about to bolt out of his seat.

“Well let’s get these… details given, shall we?” Hanamura asked slowly, smiling.

Hajime sighed and pushed his sketchbook over, “Here.”

“What’s this? Dirty drawings?” Hanamura asked.

Did he just ask that? Hajime’s face burned. Saionji started to laugh and gave Hajime a look with raised eyebrows.

“Well that could be…”

“Oh, shut up.” Hajime groaned.

“Did my ears mishear?” Hanamura asked as he opened the sketchbook, “But am I to assume you do have dirty drawings? I’ll feed you the finest foods if you show…”
“No way.” Komaeda firmly cut in, “These are the drawings from the dreams we’ve all had.”

“Hajime is making a time line.” Souda pointed to the page, “He wrote on the top corner which drawings are in which order.”

“I also got photocopies of the time line in order in the back.” Hajime said.

“How long have you been dreaming?” Hanamura asked, his tone suddenly serious, quiet.

“Um… it’s different for all of us.” Hajime rubbed his head, “Kazuichi and I started in high school. Nagito and Sonia didn’t start until they met us.”

“What about you?” Kuzuryuu asked.

Hanamura was silent and flipped the pages rather quickly through the beginning. Hajime suspected it was a mix of already knowing and not wanting to see his trial and execution again. He continued to flip the pages when he began to speak.

“I was fifteen, just about to start high school. My mother needed help in the kitchen. I went to chop and onion. I grabbed the knife and I saw a flash, just a brief one, of the knife under the table, with the glowing paint.” Hanamura flipped the page again, not looking up, “I nearly dropped the knife. However, I didn’t have another dream until I finished high school.”

It felt obvious what Hanamura dreamed of. Hajime didn’t want to ask. It had to be something unpleasant… like his execution or the Trial. Maybe even Komaeda… the laughing, spiralling eyed Komaeda gleefully talking about setting up for a murder.

“I didn’t see anyone but Komaeda.” Hanamura said, “Everyone else was just flashes. I dreamed solely of his involvement with the Trial and… my execution.”

“That’s why you ran away from Komaeda when you saw him.” Koizumi hummed softly, “Makes sense.”

“Though that brings another question up.” Sonia gingerly said, “Will you want to see Mitarai eventually?”

“Mitarai…?” Hanamura muttered before his eyes lit, “Ah, yes, I suppose I will have to eventually, right?”

No one answered it, but their silence did that for them.

“Anyways…” Souda cleared his throat, “Let’s show this timeline and get out of here. No offense, but we’re always meeting you late.”

“This isn’t late.” Hanamura pointed out, “It’s only nine o’clock. Though, if you wanted to meet me later I wouldn’t mind… I suppose… I’m very flexible with my… options.”

Souda shuddered and shuffled away.

~

With the meeting done, Hajime felt like one event in his social calendar was checked off. The pressing matters with Tsumiki and Tanaka would have to wait until the holidays and the New Year rolled by. Snuggling into Komaeda’s pillow, Hajime closed his eyes. Komaeda’s bed was so soft… it would be difficult to transition over to his place once the holidays were done. He couldn’t stay with
Komaeda for the entirety of winter after all.

“So…” Komaeda slowly started, “My parents are back tomorrow…”

Hajime’s heart spiked. Right. Swallowing thickly Hajime turned to him. Komaeda was lying down, playing with the sheets, not looking directly at him. With all the excitement over Tsumiki, Hanamura, and Tanaka, meeting Komaeda’s parents had slipped his mind.

“Right…” Hajime whispered, “What time will they come in?”

“In the morning.” Komaeda replied, “Around ten forty. They’ll still have to go through customs and drive from the airport. So… we can expect them after noon at best.”

Hajime exhaled slowly. He could do this. First impressions were the best and Hajime didn’t want to mess it up. It was extremely important now… especially since he was dating Komaeda. Their opinion meant something to Komaeda and Hajime wanted the entire interaction positive.

“I’m sorry…” Komaeda whispered, “I’m making you feel pressured.”

Was he that obvious? Hajime shuffled closer and wrapped his arms around Komaeda, hugging him tightly, “No, no, it’s fine. I am excited to meet them. Just… first impressions…”

“Technically you met them at Saionji’s performance.” Komaeda muttered.

Hajime lightly smacked Komaeda’s back, “You know what I mean. As someone they’ll actually remember… as your boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend…” Komaeda repeated with a smile, “Yes… as my boyfriend… this means a lot to me… thank you.”

“No need to thank me.” Hajime kissed Komaeda’s forehead, “It will go well.”

“Yes, it will.” Komaeda agreed before he stole a quick kiss, a smile still on his face.

~

The clock read seven in the morning. Hajime sat up immediately, his stomach twisting and pulling at the seams. He had five hours at best before he met Komaeda’s parents. Would they like him? Hajime’s stomach twisted more, squeezing all the acid out, burning his insides. He wanted to make a good impression. It wasn’t entirely for himself; this mattered a lot to Komaeda too.

Warm arms wrapped around his hips, Komaeda pulling himself closer, kissing Hajime’s side, “Good morning. How are you feeling?”

“My stomach is twisting.” Hajime dully replied.

Komaeda sat up and pulled Hajime into a hug from behind, warm and comforting. Hajime could feel his heartbeat, steady, beating in a calming rhythm. Letting out a long breath of air, Hajime closed his eyes. He could do this. Komaeda was with him.

“I’m going to get ready.” Hajime tried to pull away.

“Deep breaths Hajime.” Komaeda’s arms tightened around him, “I’ll be here with you today.”

Hajime smiled, “Thank you.”
“Now go, get ready.” Komaeda let go of him and smacked his ass.

Hajime shot a look and Komaeda laughed, rolling in the bed. Walking to the bathroom, Hajime exhaled and turned the water on. He wasn’t going to have a full bath, but he wanted a shower. Stripping quickly, Hajime walked into the room, right to the shower. The steam filled the room, instantly making it humid. Standing under the stream for a while, Hajime soaked in the heat before washing up.

Komaeda was at the sink when he walked out, brushing his hair. Hajime glanced at the door. “Should I open it? Is it too humid in here?”

“Just a bit.” Komaeda replied, “I’m going to have a shower too.”

Pushing the door open a crack, Hajime began to dry off and put on the yukata they had hanging behind the door. Letting the towel sit on his shoulders, Hajime walked out, intent on changing, but froze. Should he… wear something special? A suit? At least a dress shirt and dress pants?

“Nagito!” Hajime called, hoping he wasn’t already in the shower.

“Yes Hajime?” Komaeda poked his head out of the bathroom.

“Should I wear something formal or?” Hajime gestured to his suit.

Komaeda blinked and shook his head, “They’re coming home. For a break. The last thing they want to see are business clothes. Just wear something casual and comfortable.”

Casual and comfortable? Hajime froze. Was that fine? Komaeda seemed sure… Hajime turned back to his clothes and carefully went through. He had some old, paint splattered jeans that were immediately vetoed. In the end, Hajime picked a pair of black jeans and a blue-green shirt with an almost galaxy like swirl at the bottom.

“Looks fine.” Komaeda said, walking out of the bathroom, steam billowing out. “I’ll get changed and go down to meet you for breakfast, okay?”

“Okay.” Hajime said, “I’ll let June know you’ll be down soon.”

The kitchen was already busy, with people moving around, prepping things. Hajime shuffled in, trying to stay in the corner as best as he could, and waved in their general direction. June immediately looked up and waved back, somehow manoeuvring over gracefully.

“Good morning Hinata.” She said, “I got breakfast ready. Is Nagito up too?”

“Yes, just changing.” Hajime replied, “I’ll just be… at the table.”

Moving to the other room, Hajime sat down and twirled the spoon in the small sugar bowl. Coffee came before Komaeda walked in, sitting down across from Hajime, grabbing the sugar, adding a little to his coffee.

“Everyone is so busy.” Komaeda mused, “Haruto asked me if we’d like to come with him to the airport to pick my parents up. I declined.”

“Thank you.” Hajime sipped his coffee, “We’re going to have an awkward lunch and dinner… I don’t want to add awkward car ride to the list.”

“Don’t think like that.” Komaeda firmly said, “It will go well. Let me tell you a bit about my
Hajime sat up.

“My mother’s name is Akiko. Most people call her by her maiden name, Nakajima. You can use that?” Komaeda’s brow furrowed, “My father’s name is Uryuu. Most people call him by… well my last name.”

Right. Hajime nodded, “Question, can I still call you Nagito?”

“Yes?” Komaeda blinked, “You can’t call me Komaeda while my father is around. That would be confusing. Besides we are dating.” He added with a grin, “I think it’s to be expected you call me by my first name. No need to put on airs. It will make it easier when we tell them about our… relationship.”

“Sorry,” Hajime offered, “I just wanted to make sure.”

“We can be a bit informal around here.” Komaeda gently said, “We’re at my house. I’m sure my parents will also like to rest a bit, so lunch will be short.”

That made sense, “Where were they?”

“Taiwan.” Komaeda replied, “Checking up on our hotels there. We have many branches all around the world. My mother frequently travels to them. My father is our main accountant for our Japan branch. Usually he’s home, but this was also a bit of a vacation for them in between work.”

“Sounds busy.” Hajime mused, “Do they speak any other languages?”

“My mother knows some Mandarin… a bit of Cantonese… and English.” Komaeda replied, “My father knows English, at least basic English. Sometimes he gets roped into helping tourists.” He laughed.

“That sounds fun.” Hajime stated, “I’d like to travel one day.”

“I’d like to join you.” Komaeda said with a grin.

How… cute… Hajime wanted to comment, but their breakfast came, warm and smelling amazing. A coffee pot was also brought to them. Hajime made a mental note to not drink too much less he be jittery later.

Only about four hours to go.

~

Eleven o’clock came quickly and then the time between eleven and twelve dragged on. Hajime wanted to draw, but as soon as he opened his sketchbook all his ideas flew out of his head. He sat in the front room, tapping his pencil against his book. Maybe he could draw some things around him? Hajime tried to draw the chair across from him, but he barely got an outline when he wanted to switch it up. He tried the grandfather clock in the corner, but gave up where the intricate carvings began.

Finally, he settled on drawing Komaeda, the curve of his neck, the back of his head, the dip of his shoulders… Hajime drew lightly, trying to get the basic outline first. Komaeda wasn’t moving too much, which was a bonus. Working more on the hair, Hajime lightly shaded, smiling to himself. With the light marks, Komaeda’s hair looked white, like it was in their dreams.
He was just finishing Komaeda’s shirt, when he turned around, eyebrows raised, “I can feel your
gaze on my back Hajime.”

“Sorry…” Hajime replied, “I was drawing you.”

“Me?” Komaeda pointed to himself, “Can I move? Did I mess it up?”

“It’s fine, I got a basic outline.” Hajime said.

Komaeda stood up and walked over, smiling as he looked, “Wow… it’s nice. I’ve never seen you
sketch, just paint. I like this.” He pointed to the drawing.

“Thank you.” Hajime looked up, “You’re a good model. You don’t move a lot.”

“That can be a problem.” Komaeda nodded before leaning in, “I’ll model for you any time Hajime.”

Hajime smiled and leaned up, pressing a kiss in, “Thanks. It can be hard to find good references,
especially if it’s something small like a hand gesture.”

Komaeda pressed closer, kissing him a bit deeper. Hajime dropped his pencil and lifted his arms,
pulling Komaeda in. Komaeda fell onto his lap as they kissed warmly, going a bit deeper. Hajime felt
warmth pool in his stomach, helping the fluttering he didn’t realize his stomach was doing.

The sound of a car engine cutting off and the front door opening pulled Hajime away from
Komaeda. His heart jolted and thumped loudly, filling Hajime’s ears with the sound of blood. It…
was noon? Did he not notice time slipping?

“Don’t worry Hajime.” Komaeda got off, grabbing his hand, “I’m here. Let’s sit here. They’ll come
see us.”

Hajime shifted on the couch. Komaeda sat beside him, hands still laced. Bending down, Hajime
searched for his pencil, grabbing it, and setting it on the coffee table along with his sketchbook. Now
was the time. He smoothed his shirt and ran his fingers through his hair. He wished he paid more
attention. Perhaps had a chance to look in the mirror…

“You look fine Hajime.” Komaeda said for him, as though he read his mind.

“Are you sure?” Hajime turned, “I mean…”

The door to the room opened. Hajime snapped back, ramrod straight. He held his breath and barely
turned his head. A couple walked in, followed by June who was carrying a tray with tea and sweets.

Hajime knew he already saw them once, but that was more than a year ago and for a moment. His
first thought was Komaeda’s father had the same eyes as Komaeda did, a storm grey, that flickered
between a grey blue and grey green. He was tall too, with a good build and steady looking hands.
Hajime could see him whittling wood or fixing things around houses.

Komaeda’s mother mimicked his build, with a slighter frame and a lithe backing that swimmers and
dancers had. Her hair was lighter than Komaeda’s but her roots showed her natural colour was
darker. It was pulled back in a tight bun.

Both had a bit of dark circles under their eyes and a languid movement that spoke volumes to how
long they had been up. Hajime wanted to stand up to greet them, properly, but Komaeda’s hand was
still laced with his. That and his legs felt like jelly and his stomach was practically dancing into his
intestines.
“Nagito darling.” His mother greeted. “We’ve missed you terribly.”

“Hello mom.” Komaeda grinned, “Hello dad. I missed both of you too. Long flight?”

His father hummed, “Yes, but we’re home. Haruto informed us we have company?” He directed his gaze at Hajime.

Hajime’s hand jerked as he body lurched forward to stand up. Komaeda firmly grounded him, “Yes, we do. Why don’t you sit down and he can introduce himself?”

“Sounds good. June made us some tea and sweets. I’m looking forward to eating these.” Komaeda mother sighed warmly and sat down, immediately picking up a cookie and setting it on a small plate. “Why don’t I start? I’m Nakajima Akiko, Nagito’s mother.”

“And I’m Komaeda Uryuu.” Komaeda’s father said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Hajime thickly swallowed and did a bit of a bow, “Hello, I’m Hinata Hajime. It’s a pleasure to meet you too.”

“Hinata Hajime…” Komaeda’s mother repeated, “I believe I’ve seen you before?”

She remembered? “Uh… at Saionji…san’s performance a year ago.” Hajime carefully tacked on the honorific.

“…san…” Komaeda snorted, “Hajime is friends with Saionji.”

“Oh?” Komaeda’s father picked up the teapot, “She’s a lovely girl. I love watching her performances.”

“Yes, they’re wonderful.” Hajime nodded, “We watched her perform again this year.”

“You two went together?” Komaeda’s father inquired.


“Friends?” His mother asked with a twinkle in her eyes, “What’s this? You’ve made friends and haven’t invited all of them over? Just Hinata-san? Too embarrassed to have them meet your mother and father?”

Was this it? It felt a bit early, but then again… when was Komaeda going to tell them? Perhaps he felt it best to do it immediately rather than beat around the bush. Hajime felt Komaeda’s fingers tighten over his hand. The answer was clear, yes, Komaeda was going to tell them. Hajime’s stomach fluttered and he wanted to get it over with so the burning that was filling his lungs would leave.

“Mom…” Komaeda almost whined, “It isn’t… that… we… uh… I have something to tell you.”

The words tumbled out, like they were rushing in a race. Komaeda’s father set the tea pot down as Komaeda clamped his mouth shut a few times, pink dusting his cheeks.

“Yes Nagito?” He asked as he passed the tea around.

“Hajime and I… we’re…” Komaeda exhaled, “We’re dating.” He said the last part quickly.

Silence, thick, visible, and cold filled the room. Hajime’s ears burned, but he could see the pink
darken to red on Komaeda’s face, staining his cheeks and ears. His shoulders weren’t moving and his chest was barely going up and down.

“You’re…” His mother blinked before smiling, “Well that explains why you have had Hinata-san over for a few nights.”

Huh? Hajime felt Komaeda jolt, “Wait, you know that?”

“Haruto might have mentioned that casually.” Komaeda’s father said, “Also, you two have been holding hands since we walked in.”

Oh. Hajime gaped and looked down. He had… forgotten about that. How… embarrassing…

“We’re very happy for you two.” Komaeda’s mom said, “So, how long?”

“A year and a half?” Hajime promptly answered, brow furrowing, “We met last March… right?”

“In the parking lot.” Komaeda muttered.

“Parking lot?” Komaeda’s father asked.

“Oh…” Hajime picked his tea up, “Long story. We met again at Saionji’s performance.”

“I see.” Komaeda’s mother nodded, “This makes me happy. I’m sure Nagito has informed you we travel frequently. I’m glad he has you and friends to keep him company now. Perhaps we can meet these friends of yours now that we’ll be home for a bit?”

“You’ll be home?” Komaeda asked, his voice sounding steady, “For how long?”

“At least a month.” She replied, “At least for me. Your father will be home indefinitely.”

“I guess after the New Year I can ask everyone if they’d like to meet you…” Komaeda slowly said.

“Good.” Komaeda’s mother smiled, “Now, tell us a bit about yourself Hinata-san.”

Questions about him. This was good. Now that the truth was out there, it felt easier to breathe, to think. The first impression seemed to go well. Now he had to keep it like this. Hajime squeezed Komaeda’s hand and began to talk.

~

He talked for most of lunch. When they finished, Hajime’s throat was a bit sore, but overall everything felt like it went well. Soon after, Komaeda’s parents excused themselves, citing the need for rest and down time.


“You were nervous too.” Hajime rolled his eyes, “But yes, it went well. I’m glad.”

“We got the afternoon to ourselves.” Komaeda pointed out, “Though only a few hours before dinner. We’ll probably eat a bit early… lunch was light.”

“Okay. Sounds good.” Hajime was fine with a day inside.

“Though…” Komaeda trailed, “After supper would you like to go out with me somewhere?”
Somewhere? “Are you going to tell me where?”

“It will be a surprise.” Komaeda replied, “But I’m sure you’ll like it.”

~

Komaeda stopped the car at the mall, parking neatly. Hajime stepped out, wrapping his scarf a bit tighter. Komaeda smiled and took Hajime’s hand, walking out of the parkade and to the front of the building. The area was wide, a giant circle. In the middle was a giant Christmas tree, soft yellow white lights around it. People milled around, taking pictures, or talking. The mall was lit, yellow and warm, engulfing the area in light.

“It’s so pretty.” Hajime smiled, “I’ve never seen this tree or mall…”

“Really?” Komaeda asked, “I always try to come here every Christmas. They always have nice sales, and trees. There are more inside. Want to see?”

Hajime shook his head, “This is fine for now. Are there more trees around?”

“Yes.” Komaeda tugged him, “They got some more trees around.”

They walked along some shops and restaurants. People passed and the streets got narrower. Komaeda let go of Hajime’s hand and pulled him closer, wrapping his arm around Hajime’s shoulders. Hajime felt his face warm, but he leaned into Komaeda.

There were more trees along the side of the main mall, all colour themed. There was a blue one, a red and white one, and a silver one. The trees were significantly smaller than the one out front, but they were still nice.

“One second, I’m going to take a picture.” Hajime stopped them.

Komaeda didn’t take his arm off Hajime’s shoulders, which made it a touch difficult to fish his phone out of his pocket, but Hajime managed. Snapping a few quick pictures, Hajime turned to Komaeda.

“Want one together?”

“Sure, but let’s go to the tree at the back.” Komaeda suggested, “It’s bigger and it’s less crowded than the front.”

“Okay.”

They walked around, to the back of the mall. The tree that stood there was big, but not as big as the one out front. The lights were a mix of a yellow white and red. A few people walked around, but it was quieter. Hajime pulled Komaeda over, making sure the lighting was good, and pulled his phone out.

“Should I ask someone or?”

“No… it’s closer this way.” Komaeda said.

Hajime flipped the camera over and angled his phone, giving a smile. Komaeda did too and after a couple of pictures Hajime was satisfied and a bit cold.

“I’m a bit cold.” Hajime said, “Should we go inside?”

“Sure…” Komaeda muttered, “But… one more thing…” He stepped away from Hajime.
The warmth that left him immediately was missed. Hajime’s shoulders felt colder. Shivering he turned to Komaeda, who immediately grabbed both of his hands, pulling the two of them a bit closer, until their noses touched. Hajime snorted and smiled, letting their foreheads touch too.

“If you wanted a kiss you could just say.” Hajime muttered.

“I wanted to be a bit romantic.” Komaeda huffed, “Can I kiss you?”

“Like you need to ask.” Hajime replied.

Their lips met, warm, and soft. Komaeda pushed into their kiss, closing his eyes. Hajime did too, feeling the light of the tree against his eyes and the warmth of Komaeda’s mouth against his. Suddenly the cold outside didn’t feel so bad. Angling his mouth, Hajime kissed Komaeda, softly deepening their kiss for a moment, and pulled away.

“Thanks for coming with me.” Komaeda breathily said. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Hajime replied, “I’m glad it went well with your parents.”

“Yes, me too.” Komaeda leaned in for another kiss, “You were perfect… they loved you I know it.”

Hajime’s cheeks burned when Komaeda’s kiss lingered a bit longer than usual, pressing a bit deeper before pulling away.

“Let’s… go home Hajime…” His hands gripped Hajime’s shoulders and moved downward.

“Okay.” Hajime’s blood burned as the touch.

When they got back from the mall, legs still a bit cold, they stumbled in, and up to Komaeda’s room. Hajime barely had any balance and fell onto Komaeda’s bed. Immediately Komaeda straddled him, heavily sitting on his lap.

“You looked so cute.” Komaeda happily sighed, “When I kissed you outside the mall… I think I’ll treasure that memory.”

“You’re such a sap.” Hajime poked him before tugging his wrist, “Get down here.”

“You’re demanding…” Komaeda hummed, “Is that how it’s going to be tonight?”

Hajime rolled his eyes as Komaeda still listened and bent down, sweetly pressing their lips together. It devolved into something slick and hot, burning a trail of urge in Hajime. He pulled away.

“Your parents…”

“Are asleep way down the hall.” Komaeda huffed, “Trust me, they won’t hear us.”

“Speaking from experience?” Hajime couldn’t help but cheekily ask.

Komaeda rolled his hips against Hajime in response. It sent a warm jolt down Hajime’s spine, effectively shutting him up.

“Why, yes, Hajime, I do.” Komaeda whispered, “Why don’t we have the experience together?”
Komaeda was warmly pressed against him. Hajime’s eyes fluttered open. Absentmindedly he lifted his arm and began to stroke Komaeda’s hair. Komaeda shifted and bare skin rubbed against bare skin. Hajime flushed a bit, but he didn’t move. Their day was free. Hajime hummed. His paintings screamed in his mind, reminding him to work. Hajime grimaced but smiled as he looked at Komaeda. Maybe he’d get Komaeda to model a bit for his sketchbook, just so he didn’t fall behind in the daily sketches his teacher wanted. Or maybe he’d go back to his place and check up… see if everything was still fine.

“Good morning.” Komaeda said.

Hajime’s hand stopped in Komaeda’s hair, “Good morning.” He resumed.

Komaeda arched into his touch, “What do you want to do today?”

“I was thinking of checking up on my place.” Hajime replied, “Make sure everything is still fine. Unless your parents wanted to do something with you? I can go alone.”

“No, it’s fine. I can come with you. We can do that in the morning?”

We… Hajime smiled at the phrasing and nodded, “Sure, we can.”

“But first…” Komaeda leaned over and slowly kissed Hajime, gentle and sweet, “Good morning again.”

Hajime pulled Komaeda into a hug, “Yes, yes, good morning.”

Komaeda snuggled into it, “I am not getting up. Let’s laze here all day.”

“We can’t do that…” Hajime laughed, “But we can laze a bit.”

The moment Hajime entered his place he was reminded why Komaeda asked him to stay for the holidays. It was cold. Hajime didn’t take his jacket off and huffed, seeing his breath. Sighing he moved to his front room and turned the heater on. The stagnant smell of gas filled the place for a bit, before the heater started smoothly. Moving to his room, Hajime turned the one in there on too.

“I may extend my invite for winter in general.” Komaeda groaned, “This is cold.”

“I can’t just stay with you all winter.” Hajime protested. As much as he wanted to.

“Then we’ll just have many sleepovers together.” Komaeda firmly said.

Right. Hajime rolled his eyes. “I’m going to check my water. I turned all of it off, but I want to check my pipes.”

“I’ll just stay here… in front of the heater.” Komaeda offered.

Hajime laughed and moved to his kitchen. Turning the knob by the sink, Hajime turned his tap on, watching it splutter for a moment before a steady stream of water came out. He did the same with his bathroom, before deeming everything fine.

Gingerly, instead of walking to the front room, Hajime walked into his bedroom. Opening his closet, Hajime knelt and picked up a bag, a wrapped one. It was a day early, but Hajime didn’t mind. Komaeda could open it later if he wanted to.
Walking out, Hajime watched as Komaeda’s eyes widened, “A present?”

“For you.” Hajime handed it over, “You don’t have to open it now…”

“Too late.” Komaeda replied, “I want to see what you got me. Oh, your present is at my house. I’ll give it later.”

Hajime sat on his couch, enjoying the warm air his heater was blasting. Komaeda slowly opened the present, pulling out tissue paper and two wrapped items. Taking the smaller one, Komaeda opened it.

“A photo album?” He asked, “For polaroid’s? Thank you.” He smiled.

He moved onto the next present, lifting it, “Heavy… and rectangular…”

“Just open it.” Hajime sighed.

Komaeda did and gasped, eyes widening, “You…”

“So, I wanted to pick a good dream…” Hajime prefaced, “One with both of us, but most of them were well… not appropriate… so I picked the beach and…”

Komaeda set the frame down and kissed Hajime deeply, “Thank you.” He said as he pulled away. “This… is priceless… you even got it framed. This is a lovely painting. I’m putting it on my dresser when we get back.”

“Okay…” Hajime blushed.

“Makes me feel my present is a bit underwhelming… but I hope you like it.” Komaeda snuggled into Hajime.

“I am sure I will enjoy it.” Hajime replied, stroking Komaeda’s hair.

~

Komaeda’s presents were all art ones, a sketchbook with an array of paint and pastels that Hajime would never have bought on his own. The quality was… above what he usually used and the colours were rich and warm. Hajime picked a tube up and examined it. He’d have to paint something with the colours later.

“I uh… literally had the man working at the store help me…” Komaeda admitted, “I hope it’s fine?”

“It’s wonderful.” Hajime smiled, “I’ll use these. Thank you Nagito.”

Christmas, as short, and sweet of a holiday it was to him, felt just a bit more special this year. Hajime clutched his new sketchbook to his chest, feeling his heart beat with happiness.

~

“So, what are we going to do for New Years?” Kuzuryuu promptly asked as soon as Hajime answered his phone.

Hajime’s pen stopped moving, “Besides making sure I write out enough cards?”

“Smart ass.” Kuzuryuu sighed, “I mean, are you seeing your parents?”

The text message weighed heavily in Hajime’s mind, “Uh… overseas.”
And Komaeda?

Hajime looked up, “Hey Nagito, your parents didn’t have plans for the New Years, did they?”

“Uh… we generally don’t do traditional New Years things…” Komaeda winced, “So I don’t think we have plans.”

“He says no.” Hajime relayed to Kuzuryuu.

“Good.” Kuzuryuu said brightly, “Be free tomorrow at eight am. We got a lot to do.”

We? Hajime felt his body shudder, “We…?”

“Yes, we do.” Kuzuryuu firmly enforced, “I’ll come to pick you up and… wait put Komaeda on the phone.”

He wanted to speak to Komaeda? Hajime stood up and pushed the phone closer to Komaeda, “Here. Fuyuhiko wants to talk to you.”

“Okay?”

Komaeda took the phone, “Hello?” He paused, “Uh yes I do. Yeah… I got it last year… yeah… okay… good bye.” He hung up.

“What was that?” Hajime asked, taking his phone back.

“Nothing too special. He just wanted to see if I have to join you tomorrow morning. I’m pleased to say I don’t.” Komaeda leaned over and kissed Hajime’s cheek, “Good luck.”

“Good luck with what?” Hajime asked, his stomach twisting.

“It’s a secret. Sorry he asked me to not tell you.”

Hajime sighed and pocketed his phone, “Fine… I’ll wait I guess… though I’m jealous you don’t have to get up early.”

“Sorry love.” Komaeda shrugged, “I can’t fix that.”

Great. Hajime turned back to his New Years Cards. If he was going to be busy tomorrow he should finish the cards.

~

Yawning and rubbing his eyes, Hajime sat up, curling the blankets around him for a moment before reluctantly leaving the warmth of the bed. Slowly he began to pull his clothes out, dressing slowly, his muscles moving on auto pilot. Komaeda stirred a bit, turning, but he didn’t open his eyes. Hajime wished he was still in bed.

Leaning over, Hajime pressed a kiss to Komaeda’s forehead and walked to the bathroom. Washing up quickly, he walked out, less he go back into bed. Heading downstairs, Hajime saw the staff, already working, talking silently. He paused. Should he go and get breakfast? Or ask them…? How did he do this without Komaeda?

“Hinata?” June called out.

“Uh… good morning…” Hajime stumbled over his words, “I’m… I got some plans with
Fuyuhiko…” He began to ramble.

“You should have told me earlier… I could have made a proper breakfast…” June huffed before pointing to the table, “Well? Sit down. I’ll make something quick.”

Hajime flushed, but did as she asked, walking to the table, sitting down. June, and other cook began to talk quietly, grabbing stuff from the fridge as they did so. The kitchen’s atmosphere felt slow, languid, calm. He nearly fell asleep, but woke when the smell of coffee wafted in.

“Here.” The other cook said with a smile on his lips, “Do you take anything in your coffee?”

“No, no this is fine.” Hajime took it and sipped, “Thank you…”

“Ichiro.” He prompted, “It’s fine. June is the one usually talking with you.”

Right. Hajime would remember that. “Thank you, Ichiro.”

“You’re welcome.” He left.

Hajime drank his coffee slowly, enjoying the warmth that filled him. He was barely a quarter way done when June walked in, carrying a plate. There was lightly grilled salmon and some salad. She had opted out of rice and instead there was a roll of bread, cut open already, with a hint of jam.

“Thank you.” Hajime accepted the plate.

“Is Nagito going too?” She asked.

“No, just me. Apparently.” Hajime replied.

June nodded and left. Hajime picked his fork up and began to eat, setting his phone on the side to check the time. Everything was delicious, but Hajime had to eat rather quickly. Finishing the plate in record time, he finished the last bit of his coffee and took the plate and mug back to the kitchen. June and Ichiro gave a look, eyebrows raised. Hajime flushed.

“Sorry… I have to see Fuyuhiko soon and…”

“You didn’t have to bring the dishes back.” Ichiro cut him off.

Oh. Hajime let him take the dishes, “Sorry? I just… couldn’t leave them.”

“Right.” Ichiro laughed.

“I’ll… just get going…” Hajime rubbed his head.

“See you later.” Ichiro and June called out at the same time.

Hajime grabbed his coat and slipped his shoes on, pocketing his phone. Looking out the window, he watched as snow lightly fell, slow and soft. Hajime amused himself by drawing pictures on the window until Kuzuryuu’s limo showed up.

Stepping outside, Hajime quickly walked over, grateful to slip inside the warmth of the limo. Inside, Souda was already there, fiddling with his scarf. Kuzuryuu sat across from him, with Pekoyama beside him.

“Uh… good morning.” Hajime greeted.
“Good morning.” Pekoyama gave a nod, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah…” Hajime slowly said, “Ready for what? I don’t know what we’re doing today.”

“Don’t bother,” Souda sourly muttered, “I tried asking on the way here and nothing.”

“I was waiting for Hajime.” Kuzuryuu defended himself, “We’re going to buy you two a proper kimono.”

Hajime felt his blood drain. A… proper… he didn’t mean…

His expression was painted on his face. Kuzuryuu chortled, “Yes, I do. Let’s have fun. Kishiwada-san has outfitted all my and Peko’s kimono in the past. You’ll be very polite to her.”

Souda gulped and Hajime groaned. This morning was going to be long, but that was besides the point.

“Are you sure?” Hajime asked, “You already bought us suits. This is…”

“Something you have no say in.” Kuzuryuu cut him off, “You’re…” He bit his lip, “You’re Family to me. I am not doing this for gratitude or for your loyalty. I am doing this because you’re my friends.”

Friends… it was heart warming to hear Kuzuryuu state it bluntly and openly. Hajime’s mind flashed to the pins he gave to him and Souda. Usually Hajime liked to think about those as tokens of friendship, that he wasn’t really part of the Kuzuryuu Clan.

But, that wasn’t true, was it? Sure, Hajime wasn’t technically “Yakuza”, but he was important to Kuzuryuu and Kuzuryuu important to him. He’d always be there to help him and Kuzuryuu would agree. In a way, that made them Family.

Suddenly the idea of standing around in a shop for hours didn’t feel so bad.

~

“Yes… that colour…” Kishiwada-san muttered.

Hajime tried to not wiggle as she held up a square of fabric against his arm. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and her kimono fitted a woman her age. The lavender was muted just enough and the ivory, olive, and occasional sparks of blue all melted together into a gorgeous design. Up close Hajime could see birds on her sleeves, the embroidery so light it was impossible to see at a distance.

She removed the fabric (a dark neural green) and pressed another fabric colour to his arm (a blue so dark it looked black) and made a sound in her throat. Stepping away she wrote something down and walked around him, tapping his shoulders.

“We’ll have to do measurements…” She softly said, eyes stern and calculating, “You know if you came to me earlier this would be better.” She turned to Kuzuryuu.

To Hajime’s surprise, Kuzuryuu looked down, cheeks pink, like a school boy being scolded. Actually, Hajime had seen Kuzuryuu in the Principal’s office and he didn’t look even a percentage as sheepish as he did now.

“I’ll pay for the effort and time.” Kuzuryuu finally said, “I apologize for the inconvenience Kishiwada-san.”
“No apologies needed,” She huffed before turning to Hajime, “Go stand over there.” She pointed to a three-panel mirror, “My assistants will take care of you.”

Hajime nodded and walked over. A boy, a bit older than Hajime, was already there. He pushed his glasses up and gestured to a room closed off by a long curtain.

“We’ll start with some of our basic matches and go from there.”

“Ah, thank you.” Hajime bowed, “I’m grateful for your help.”

“Positivity.” The boy grinned, “I like that. Don’t thank me just yet though. We’ll be throwing you in and out of kimono all morning.”

When he put it like that, it was enough to make Hajime slightly grimace.

~

Finally!” Souda gasped as they walked out of the shop, nearly hurdling his body to the limo, “This was a million times worse than suit shopping.”

“I think our results were fruitful.” Kuzuryuu said, “Now, you’ll have something to wear for the New Year.”

“Thanks, Fuyuhiko… and Peko for coming along.”

“No problem,” Pekoyama replied.

“Yes, thanks you two!” Souda said, “Now let’s go into the limo please.”

Kuzuryuu grinned, “Sure, sure, we’ll get you two home.”

They entered the limo, sitting comfortably inside. Hajime held his bag with his kimono to his chest, smiling. His legs ached and his mind wanted to shut off, but this day was a good day. It was silent for a bit before Kuzuryuu cleared his throat.

“So, uh… you two are free for New Years Eve.” He stated it like a fact.

Hajime through back to the conversation Komaeda had with him on the phone, “Yes, Nagito told you I was, right?”

“I’m free.” Souda nodded his head, “I’ll do the… family stuff afterwards.”

“Then… would you like to come to my place?” Kuzuryuu asked, “To ring in the New Year properly and all? Also, for your birthday Hajime.”

“That sounds great!” Souda exclaimed, “Do I have to bring something?”

“No, but wear your kimono?” Kuzuryuu asked, “If you come to my place, I’ll have people help you with that. You too Hajime?”

“Uh…” Hajime bit his lip, “Maybe Komaeda has someone for that?”

“If not just let us know.” Pekoyama replied.

~
The moment Hajime returned Komaeda was there, hugging him briefly before pulling away. “Hey, how was kimono shopping?”

“You…” Hajime flicked his forehead, “You knew what I was going to be subjected to.”

“Yes, yes, you survived.” Komaeda replied, “I’ll help you get into your kimono when we go to Kuzuryuu’s.”

Of course, he knew. “Right… he told you about the party… and… you’re not going to help me into my kimono. You’ll be more of a distraction.”

Komaeda laughed, a blush filling his cheeks.

Midnight was approaching. Hajime looked outside. The moon shone brightly in the cloudless sky. Behind him, the party continued. It was smaller than Hajime expected. Only Souda and Sonia joined them.

“Owari has a large extended family.” Kuzuryuu said before Hajime could ask.

“What about Saionji and Koizumi?” Komaeda asked.

“Already have plans.” Kuzuryuu promptly replied.

Hajime shrugged. In a way, it was nice. Hajime loved seeing everyone, but it was rare for him to just see a few of his friends. It made the night more special though, and Hajime was enjoying the night already. A few card games, a few rounds of snacks and drinks… everything was warm with laughter and food. It felt like a perfect send off to the year.

“So,” Kuzuryuu spoke suddenly, “I got a gift for you Hajime, Kazuichi.”

“You do?” Hajime tried to think. They had given Christmas presents… there was one more?

“It’s… maybe a bit presumptuous.” Kuzuryuu said, “But you two do know I think of you as my brothers, like Family, right?”

The admittance… it sent a smile on Hajime’s face and a flutter in his stomach. He couldn’t find words to say. Souda looked that way too. His face was pink and he fiddled with his sleeve.

“I…” Kuzuryuu pulled two boxes out of his kimono sleeve and pressed them into Hajime and Souda’s hands, “I am giving these to you. Know that these are very important and I am giving it seriously.”

Seriously? Hajime’s heart thumped. Should he be worried? He glanced at Pekoyama. When was the last time they had a self defense class? Between Tsumiki, Tanaka, Hanamura, and school, it had slipped, been put on hold.

“Open them.” Kuzuryuu said.

Hajime did, fingers numb. It took a couple of tries to get the bow undone, but he managed, opening the present. Inside was a tie, black and rolled up. Carefully, Hajime took it out. The silk was soft and it unravelled as soon as Hajime lifted it.

On the front was a white pattern of a dragon, curled up half way. It was eastern in style and highly detailed. Hajime felt his breath shorten. Was this…?
“It’s a Kuzuryuu Family tie.” Pekoyama took over, “Normally, this tie is only given to Family, to those loyal and trustworthy.”

She didn’t have to say more. Hajime felt a sob almost slip his throat. Kuzuryuu… was saying a lot with this tie. Like the pin, there was a weight with the gesture, many unspoken words that couldn’t be spoken. He had always felt he wasn’t truly part of Kuzuryuu’s Family. He wasn’t Yakuza and deep down Hajime knew Kuzuryuu did things that people would find… unethical… but this… this was bridging that gap. He could no longer think naively that for a second anyone who saw him with Kuzuryuu didn’t immediately think he was Yakuza. It should have bothered him, but it didn’t.

“Thank you Fuyuhiko.” Hajime pressed the tie to his chest.

“Thank you…” Souda repeated, almost as though he didn’t hear Hajime, “This… I…” He swallowed thickly.

“This is a great honour.” Pekoyama explained firmly, “Please, don’t wear this tie flippantly. With this, Fuyuhiko is stating you are not just part of his Family, but he trusts you explicitly.”

“We… understand…” Hajime whispered, “Thank you…”

The clock in the corner of the room began to chime, as though it was on some sort of symbolic queue. It was nearly midnight… the New Year was upon them, filled with new possibilities.

There was no loud countdown from them, but as the last bell rang, Komaeda pulled Hajime into a kiss, sweet and warm. Hajime closed his eyes and kissed back.

The New Year was here.

~

They returned to Komaeda’s place. Hajime’s brain was fuzzy and he barely had the energy to undress and flop down bed. He felt warm arms wrap around him tightly. Hajime snuggled close to Komaeda and drifted off to sleep with a smile dancing on his lips.

~

_The boat rocked as waves hit the sides. The light of the boat cast shadows everywhere. Salt and brine filled the space with the smell of the ocean, full of life and death._

_Kamukura sat against the ship’s wall, legs curled slightly. Across from him sat Servant, humming, picking at his jacket. His left arm was hidden against the side of the wall, but Kamukura could smell the rotting flesh, the decay, and the blood._

_His humming was cheerful, reflective of how he talked. Servant never stopped smiling through his introduction before the boat set sail and his humming was laced with a smile. Kamukura glanced out the small window, but all he could see was blue sky. It didn’t tell much, but Kamukura knew they were at least a day away from their destination, Jabberwock Island._

“Hey…” Servant suddenly spoke, “Hey…”

_Kamukura turned to look at him. Servant gave a serene smile and shifted, “Are you enjoying this? Our little ride? Do you like boats?”_

_Was this his attempt at small talk? Kamukura blinked, Servant wasn’t deterred. He sat up a bit, the left hand resting on the wall. The brightness of the red nails contrasted with the sickly colour of the_
arm. Servant was already risking infection, but perhaps that was being countered by his luck. Kamukura didn’t care. Either way, all of this was boring.

~

Kamukura’s eyes fluttered just a bit. All around him he could feel warmth and the press of a body against his. Servant… or Komaeda… whatever name the other was going by. Kamukura felt sleep press in his mind, making the finer details unneeded. Shifting a bit, Kamukura easily wiggled Servant/ Komaeda out from his arms and turned around, on his side. Kamukura closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

~

Hajime woke on his side, arms cold. Groaning he turned and stretched his legs. Komaeda was on the other side of the bed, fast asleep, chest rising and falling evenly. Hajime blinked. Didn’t he… fall asleep with Komaeda in his arms? How did they… untangle like this? It wasn’t a minor change… they were practically sleeping alone.

“Hajime?” Komaeda’s voice sleepily floated in the air.

Hajime pushed his thoughts away. He could figure that out later. Shuffling closer to Komaeda he wrapped his arms around him, burying his face in the back of Komaeda’s neck. The glowing numbers of the clock told him it was a bit too early to be up, but not early enough that he could fall asleep. Hajime groaned. They had to visit the temple in the morning. Hopefully he’d function fine.

~

So many people were at the temple. Hajime pulled his jacket over his shoulders and moved along the crowd. His five-yen coin burned in his hands, warm from being held. Komaeda stood beside him, arm linked with his. The crisp morning air was stagnant, but strong, as it bit into their skin, nipping it, and making it red. After this Hajime was going to suggest they buy something warm, maybe sit inside for a bit.

The line moved and they shifted slowly to the front. Once they were there, Hajime threw his coin in, bowed twice and clapped his hands twice. Remaining still, Hajime thought what he wanted for the New Year. Komaeda’s presence burned at his side. Their relationship was important. Hajime wanted to keep it healthy and happy. His friends too. He wanted them to remain in his life. Finally, their dreams… he wanted them pieced together, solved, the mysteries of their past lives no longer a mystery.

Smiling Hajime finished, giving one final bow.

Chapter End Notes

Hanamura: I hope I wrote him fine... it was a blast...

Mandarin and Cantonese: Two major dialects in Chinese. Most people are familiar with Mandarin, as it is spoken in Beijing. My father grew up in Hong Kong and in the south they speak Cantonese. The two dialects are very different.

Modelling: When I did art in University we had models and while I can imagine how
hard it is to maintain a pose, we had one model who would significantly move all the
time. Drove me crazy.

Parents Reaction: I didn't want to make a big deal out of their reaction. This isn't the
kind of story for that.

Christmas and New Years: In Japan the holidays are reversed from the West. Christmas
is a romantic holiday with little traditions and celebrations. Most people still have work!
They do exchange gifts, but it isn't seen as the time to get together with family. New
Years is when Japan has many traditions (like food to eat etc) and is considered the time
to get together with family.

Heaters and Water: As I've stated before most of Japan doesn't have Central Heating. It's
annoying as hell and instead they use heaters. Also, I based the water off of my house
here and I have knobs at each area where there is water (so my kitchen, my bathroom
and my tub/shower area). I know some houses have a single valve that turns all water
off. It just depends on the house.

New Years Cards: Like Christmas cards, many people in Japan send these to friends
and family for the New Year.

Kimono: I know most think of colourful ones, but kimono for older women are muted in
colour. Bright colours and large patterns are for young girls. Also, it can be pluralized as
"kimonos" or "kimono". Both work.

Helping with Kimono: It's a long, difficult process to do on your own, even for men,
who don't have the large obi that women do. It's a million times easier to have someone
to help.

Temple: There is a process to offer prayers at temples. I outlined the basic one. If there is
a bell the process differs and some have extra bows or claps.

Five Yen Coin: The basic, standard fare to offer to the gods. Anyone familiar with
Noragami knows Yato requests five yen and that's because it's the basic offering.
Returning to school always held a bit of warmth in the air, a clean, crisp feeling that joined the movement of everyone. Despite the nagging reminder that a new semester meant more work and classes, Hajime couldn’t help but smile a bit. Sure, the charm would wear off quickly, but it was just a part of being a student. People bustled around him, heading to class, talking to friends, reuniting with some. Pulling his phone out, Hajime glanced at his schedule. His first class, painting, was in the same building as always. Hopefully they’d be in the upper studio, where the warm air rose and wasn’t right outside the entrance to the building. Making a sharp right turn, Hajime was pocketing his phone, when he ran into someone. Something warm hit his torso and Hajime stumbled back, nearly slipping on the snow. Flushing, he regained his posture.

“I’m sorry I…” Hajime blinked.

“Why hello Hinata.” Hanamura greeted, “Fancy running into you here.”

“Oh… yeah…” Hajime rubbed his head, “What are you doing here?”

“Me?” Hanamura chuckled, “I’m here to give a lecture to… teach some students.” His voice dipped down.

Hajime shivered, “Right. That sounds good…?”

“Oh, hopefully it will be. I always want to… stimulate my audience, be it in the kitchen or in the classroom.” Hanamura winked, “But I’m glad I ran into you. Could you help me?”

“With what?” Hajime slowly asked.

“Where is the Business building?” Hanamura asked.

“Business?” Hajime repeated.
“Yes, I’m giving a lecture on running a business this week.” Hanamura clarified.

“Oh well…” Hajime swallowed. The Business building was in the same direction as the Art building… “Here, I’ll show you. It’s on my way to my class anyways.”

“Thank you Hinata.” Hanamura said with a smile, “Lead the way.”

That… was a tame response. Hajime pointed, “Let’s go.”

They started to walk, silence stretching over them. Hajime wanted to say something, but their lack of a common subject (minus the dreams) was overwhelming him. Plus, with Hanamura's… personality… any questions about him could be interpreted the wrong way…

“I can feel what you’re thinking.” Hanamura spoke suddenly, “But… you’re already dating someone…”

Oh. Hajime read between the lines. It was because of Komaeda. He almost snorted, but held it back. Hanamura had good reason to be terrified of him.

“Oh… okay… good.” Hajime managed to say, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Hanamura gave a smile, one that felt real, not sticky or flirty, “Though… if you could indulge me… I have a question.”

“A question?” Hajime blinked, “Okay?”

“What is Komaeda like… as a person?”

Hanamura’s voice was small and his gaze set forward on their path. Hajime almost stopped walking. There was something brewing in the background, an expectation waiting to form. All the words Hajime could say were ready to fly in the air, but he had to hold them back. Suddenly his words felt heavy in his mouth, metallic, like bullets ready to fly into the air, ripping through everything. Hanamura needed an answer and an honest one, a careful one. Hajime weighed his words. What should he say? He had to say something, silence was also damaging. Swallowing Hajime spoke.

“He has people around him who love him.” Hajime said, “People who will always support him and always want what’s best for him. This had made him confident. He’s confident in himself. Nagito… he’s… able to translate this confidence when meeting others. But he’s not arrogant or rude.”

“That’s poetic.” Hanamura laughed a bit, “What about to you? How is he to you?”

“Oh…” Hajime blinked, “He’s eager, always wanting to learn more about me, wanting to be my friend always. I always feel comfortable around him, warm. Even before he remembered, I enjoyed his company. I did screw up, but we’re fine now.”

“Screw up?” Hanamura leaned closer, “What kind of… screw up?” His voice pitched lower.

A shudder ran down Hajime’s spine. He elbowed Hanamura, getting his shoulder, “It’s a long story. Here.” Hajime changed the subject, “Here is the Business building.” He pointed, “I got a class to go to, so have fun. Good luck in your presentation.”

“Oh… leaving me hanging, huh?” Hanamura shook his head, “I’ll see if you’ll tell me later Hinata. I’ll be off.”

Hajime didn’t wait. He walked towards the Art Building, hoping that Hanamura would forget by the
Leaving class at the end was a pain. Not only were there art portfolios blocking the way everywhere, but other classes were ending. The halls were flooded with students and outside wasn’t better. Squeezing past some people, Hajime was silently thankful for a locker to leave his painting in. If only drawing class was that simple… maybe he’d have to drive to those classes and stash his portfolio in his car.

“…and then I threw a pen at him!” Hajime caught the tail end of a conversation.

“Are you serious? I would kick anyone if they tried to hit on me like that!”

Something sunk in Hajime’s stomach. He tried to not listen to their conversation, to move on, but suddenly a crowd of people emerged, blocking his way, walking slowly. It was like being caught in a storm. Hajime wanted to push forward, but social norms made it awkward.

“… I swear he was leering at us the entire time he talked! I ran out of the lecture theatre the moment class ended!”

This… Hajime wanted to tap them on the shoulder, to clarify and offer condolences to them. The suspicion wasn’t sneaking. It was bulldozing him in the face, trampling over him like a snow plow removing snow off the streets. Despite not knowing him long enough, this had Hanamura written all over it.

“Oh hey, Hinata!”

Hajime froze. How did he spot him? And why was he out of the building at the exact same time as he was? Where was he? Hajime whipped his head around, but couldn’t spot anyone in the mass of people. Maybe if he walked slowly, crouching into the crowd no one (especially the girls) would see him with Hanamura… a hand, warm and low caught Hajime’s arm. He nearly screamed.

“There you are Hinata!” Was Hanamura purring?

“Uh… hi… could you let go of my arm?” Hajime wiggled his arm out as he asked.

The crowd of people suddenly was disappearing, most of them girls, though Hajime saw a few guys edge away from them, eyeing them as they walked away, like they were carnivorous animals and they were helpless rabbits. Now the path was clear for him to walk, but Hajime wished it wasn’t.

“I cannot believe we ended at the same time. You still have a story to tell me, yes?”


“Me? Well that’s so kind of you to wonder about my health…”

“Your face is bruising and…”

“Oh well… you know… some of the students got a little… rough…”

“…You got many things thrown at you, didn’t you?” Hajime dryly asked.

“If I knew the girls in those classes were like that I would have… tried to mentally prepare myself.” Hanamura laughed.
“I don’t think they appreciated the flirting.” Hajime informed him.

“People are like dishes, you know.” Hanamura informed him, “You can’t open a clam without some effort.”

“I don’t think continuing to try is the way to do it…” Hajime muttered.

“To each their own.” Hanamura shook his head, “Anyways, you had a story to tell me?”

Crap. He still remembered. Hajime sighed, but deep down a voice told him that Hanamura probably wasn’t going to let it down. Best to give an abridged version.

“Nagito saw my dream drawings before he remembered and drew some conclusions.” Hajime simply said, “It lead to a fight and… I realized keeping silent wasn’t the best solution. We worked it out.”

“Oh ho, your drawings huh? I believe this was hinted when we met at my restaurant, yes? Tell me, are they as dirty as I think they are?”

“What?” Hajime’s face burned and he looked around, hoping no one heard that part. “What do you…?”

“You two had some serious… undertones… during my trial.” Hanamura stated, “If I wasn’t so scared for my life, I probably would have said something during the trial.”

That… out of all the things he could remember… Hajime gaped.

“I take that stunned silence as a yes.” Hanamura leered closer, “I’m right, yes?”

“You…” Hajime dropped the subject, “I best be off.”

Hanamura laughed, “Oh, don’t worry I won’t ask to see the drawings. I’m sure Komaeda wouldn’t like that. Besides some things are best left to fantasy, yes?”

“I’m going.” Hajime wasn’t going to grace Hanamura with a response.

“I’m just teasing you.” Hanamura assured him, patting his arm, “I got another presentation to do, so I’ll be off. See you later Hinata.”


~

Komaeda chuckled, softly, barely escaping his lips, but it stopped Hajime in his sentence. Giving a leveling look, Hajime watched as Komaeda bit his lip, eyes twinkling, as he sat up straighter, playing with blanket on his bed idly.

“Sorry Hajime, you were saying?”

“Did you laugh?” Hajime flopped onto the bed, “It was so embarrassing! Are you laughing at my embarrassment? It’s linked to you too.”

“Sorry love,” Komaeda wiggled closer, touching Hajime’s back, trailing his hand down, “It is a bit funny though. Hanamura is warming up to you. I’m glad. His initial reaction to us was skittish. Now, it’s almost like a friend teasing you.”
When he put it that way… Hajime felt a bit of a smile fill his face, “I suppose you’re right… he’s still a bit exhausting to be around. I swear everyone moved away from me like I was a virus.”

“I’m just glad he isn’t flirting with you.” Komaeda admitted, “I never realized it would bother me until I experienced it.”

“That’s fine.” Hajime assured him, “I don’t mind.”

~

A soft, warm light filtered into the room, bathing everything in a white light. Hajime felt Komaeda beside him, warm and soft, breathing lightly. A languid oozing lapped into the room, coating the walls and the floor. A small part of Hajime’s mind told him to lie down, but his stomach rumbled in protest. Hajime wiggled out of Komaeda’s arms and sat up, stretching. Slipping out of the bed, Hajime quickly cleaned up and slipped out of Komaeda’s room, shutting the door, smiling. Being in Komaeda’s house was nice. Urgency to do things, like laundry, cooking, cleaning… it all melted away. At this point, being warm all the time felt like a bonus. Still, he shouldn’t over stay his welcome. He should check up on his house soon, perhaps this afternoon?

Walking down the stairs, Hajime entered the kitchen and froze. Komaeda’s parents were there, talking, the newspaper out. Slowly Hajime backed out. Perhaps he should go back upstairs? Was it rude to interrupt them?

“Good morning Hinata.” Komaeda’s mother called out.

Too late. He gave a smile, his mouth stretching into a strange angle, “Uh, good morning.”

“Please, have a seat.” She gestured to the table.

It was good then. Hajime carefully walked in and sat down, “Thank you… Nakajima-san, Komaeda-san.”

“Just Akiko and Uryuu are fine.” She assured him, “Tell me, is Nagito still sleeping?”

Her question was innocent, but Hajime still felt his face burn. Not that he was under any illusion they didn’t know he slept with Komaeda, but some reminders were best left forgotten. Still, not answering was rude. Hajime swallowed.

“Uh… yeah he is.”

“He’s always been a bit of a late riser.” Uryuu laughed, “Tried to use excuses so he wouldn’t have to go to school.”

Hajime snorted, feeling his shoulders relax. June walked into the room, silently pushing a plate of food towards Hajime. He gave a smile, thanking her before he started to eat carefully. He wasn’t a messy eater, but with the prospect of Komaeda’s parents judging him… he wanted to be careful.

“So, tell me, did you enjoy the holidays here?” Akiko asked.

“Yes, I have.” Hajime replied as he speared a slice of pineapple, “You’ve been very generous to me. Thank you very much.”

“It’s no problem.” Uryuu assured him, “You’re welcome any time here.”

“That’s very kind.” Hajime twirled his fork a bit, “But I don’t want to infringe on your hospitality.
I’ll return to my place soon.”

“I see…” Akiko muttered, “We hope you’ll stay again.”

“Okay.” Hajime nibbled on the pineapple, feeling a bit of warmth bloom in his chest. “I’d love to.”

“That makes both of us very happy.” Uryuu said, his smile soft, “Nagito never really had people around when he was young. We always hoped that some day, he’d have more than just classmates he got along with, or people in clubs that he would see a lot for only a term. We’ve tried to not let work interfere with family life… but sometimes it happens in our jobs.”

Hajime’s heart twisted. He could see Komaeda, cheerful, surrounded by love, but some of it not for forever. Meeting people and moving forward was a part of life, but people always wanted things to carry with them, to keep holding on as they moved between the various stages. Like mementos, friends were a portal to a person, to memories. Hajime’s childhood memories were like anchors in a sea, feelings and sensations tying the memory together, some tainted with nostalgia. Despite most of them pleasant, Hajime had no desire to dwell on some. It was only once Kuzuryuu, Pekoyama, and Souda appeared in his life, Hajime truly felt like he started to live.

“I hope you don’t judge us, think us as awful parents.” Akiko gently pulled Hajime from his thoughts, “What we’re trying to say, we’re grateful to you and to the friends I’m sure Nagito will introduce to us some day, won’t you sweetie?”

Hajime jumped as he felt Komaeda’s body press against his back, still addled with the warmth of sleep. A kiss was pressed into his hair before Komaeda straightened up with a groan, once perfectly balanced with love, affection, and annoyance.

“Mother…” Komaeda drew the word out, “You’ll meet them soon…”

“Is your old mother embarrassing you?” Akiko teased.

“No…” Komaeda muttered, but his cheeks were a bit pink.

Uryuu laughed and stood up, “I know a dismissal when I see one.” He ruffled Komaeda’s hair as he walked by, “Enjoy your morning. Your mother and I are going to be at the office for a bit, but we’ll be back later.”

“We love you Nagito. We’ll see you later.” Akiko echoed as she got up too, kissing Nagito’s forehead.

Komaeda didn’t sit down until they left. Hajime held back a laugh as Komaeda glanced at the door, as though he expected his parents to return. When they didn’t he finally relaxed into the chair.

“I hope they didn’t start questioning you.” He muttered.

“No, nothing like that.” Hajime assured, “Your parents are very nice.”

Komaeda smiled, “Thank you Hajime. I was just worried.”

“Worried?” Hajime raised an eyebrow, “At what? Did you think they’d bring out embarrassing photos or something?”

Komaeda’s cheeks pinkened. Hajime’s brain took a moment to process, but once he did he leaned closer, eyes dancing with light. “Wait, you have some here, yes?”
“Don’t you dare ask them to see those.” Komaeda warned.

“I can’t promise anything.”

Hajime laughed and Komaeda glowered, a smile threatening to pull at his mouth.

~

His house was cold, silent. Hajime flipped a light on and walked in, slipping into a pair of shoes so he didn’t have to feel the hardwood against his feet. Turning the heater on in his bedroom, Hajime bustled around, double checking the pipes. A staleness filled the house, stagnant and musky. Hajime spotted dust on the coffee table and cabinets. Grabbing a duster, Hajime dusted, feeling a bit better when everything looked a bit cleaner.

Returning to his room, Hajime dusted his bookshelf too, silently humming to himself. The silence was welcome, almost a cushion for his brain to shut off, to just focus on the task in front of him. Finishing his dusting, Hajime walked out and checked his fridge. There was nothing inside, except a few condiments and water. He’d have to grocery shop when he returned to his place. Mentally Hajime went over his week. Classes would keep him busy, so he’d have to move the next weekend. Satisfied, Hajime quickly went to the bathroom, wincing at seeing his breath hit the mirror, and quickly dusted and wiped the sink down. Satisfied with his quick cleaning, Hajime returned to his room and turned the heater off. Crawling into his bed, jacket and all, Hajime shut his eyes, yawning, drifting into a light sleep.

~

“Are you sure Hajime?” Komaeda asked.

“Yeah,” Hajime replied, “I don’t want to infringe on your hospitality for too long. I’ll move back by the end of the week.”

Komaeda pouted, his cheeks puffing out a bit and his lip pouting, “It really isn’t a bother…”

“I know, I know.” Hajime assured, “I just really feel I am imposing. Don’t worry… I’ll come back here often with you.”

“I guess that’s fine…” Komaeda muttered before perking up, “On the plus I do like your place. I’ll help you move back.”

“Thank you.” Hajime smiled.

~

‘Coffee, tomorrow.’ – Saionji

‘What?’ – Hajime

‘I said, we’re doing coffee tomorrow. You’re free, right?’ – Saionji

‘I guess I am, but…” – Hajime

‘Good. Mahiru and I will see you. I’ll text our meeting point.’ – Saionji

~

Wrapping his hands around his coffee a bit tighter, Hajime waited as Saionji and Koizumi bought
their coffee. The coffee shop they found barely had room for people to make a queue. There were a few tables, but most were occupied. It was a bit sad. Hajime only got to enjoy the warmth of the shop for a moment, before exiting, using a door with a large sign that read “FOR EXITING ONLY”.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Hajime huddled closer to the building. They hadn’t received snow in a while, but it was only a matter of time. The weather wouldn’t start cooperating until mid March early April. Cold had already worn out it’s welcome and Hajime was ready for the weather to warm up, even for a bit.

“Sorry about that.” Koizumi walked out.

“Don’t apologize.” Saionji huffed, “You didn’t have to walk outside you know.” She eyed him.

“I didn’t want to congest the store any more than it already is.” Hajime defended himself. “But I never knew this place existed. I’ll have to visit it later.”

“It’s better in summer.” Koizumi replied, waving to a sectioned off area, “They have more tables outside you can use.”

Hajime eyed the section. There was nothing, save for a pile of snow, but he could envision it. Tables… chairs… umbrellas… he smiled. The café was a bit off the street, making it slightly quieter, the traffic a bit farther away. He’d have to bring Komaeda with him, maybe on a weekday when it would be quieter.

“You’re thinking of your boyfriend.” Saionji accused, “You got that silly grin on your face.”

Flushing Hajime coughed and shoved his thoughts away, “Yeah… and?” He mumbled.

“It’s cute.” Saionji added, “No need to be defensive. I’ve tripped during rehearsals thinking of Mahiru…”

“Hiyoko…” Koizumi’s cheeks were pink and not just from the cold, “That’s sweet, but you almost broke your leg that one time.”

“Broke her leg?” Hajime asked.

“It was fine.” Saionji said at the same time, waving her hand.

“She almost fell off the stage.” Koizumi elaborated briefly, “It was near a show. You gave everyone a heart attack.”

“It worked out.” Saionji said, “Anyways, enough about my blunders.” She dug into her jacket pocket, “Here.” She thrust the card at him.

Hajime accepted the card. The paper was thick and the writing neat, with beautiful calligraphy strokes. There was a distinct smell of ink on the card, making Hajime realize it was hand made. Turning it around, he stared at the back. There was a small message, but the back mainly had a photo. Everyone was there, smiling brightly, all dressed up. Hajime recognized it as a picture from Saionji’s last performance.

“Wow this is really sweet.” Hajime smiled, “It’s such a nice photo. Thank you.” He tucked the card into his jacket. He’d read the message properly later, in private.

“Yeah,” Saionji’s cheeks were red, “Mahiru took a good picture of us. Of course, she’s amazing like
that. We worked hard on it, so you better appreciate it.”

“I do.” Hajime assured her, “I’ll show Nagito later. Thank you.”

Saionji looked away, “Well… yeah… of course you like it. And… we liked your card too… but only barely!” She added, “Your writing is rather messy Hinata!”

“I…” Hajime’s face burned, “Sorry… I just write normally. I was never good at calligraphy. I only did it in school.”

“Are you serious?” Saionji looked at him, eyes wide, “I had that shoved at me ever since I could hold a pencil. Hey, I could teach you some time!”

“I…” Hajime turned to Koizumi, who had her hands on her hips.

“She’s right. Your writing made me cringe Hinata! At least let her give you some pointers.”

“I…” Hajime floundered, “I already do self defense with Peko and Kazuichi…”

“So, we’ll just make this a crash course.” Saionji shrugged, “How does the weekend sound?”

Did he have a choice? Hajime looked at Saionji. She had her arms crossed and her brow furrowed, but Hajime could see her eyes darting, her posture shifting. Did she want him to say yes? Hajime hid his smile and felt his heart warm.

“Ok, that works for me.” Hajime said.

“It does?” Saionji’s arms unfolded and her eyes widened before she coughed, “I mean good. You need the lesson.”

Hajime’s lips twitched into a smile. He hid it behind his coffee cup.

~

Traitor. The word stung Hajime more than he cared to admit. It burrowed it not his skin, like a tic seeking blood. He wanted to scratch his arms until they bleed, use a pair of tweezers, dig around until he got the word pulled out, bloody and shiny. Hajime wanted to use a blow torch and burn the phrase to the ground, burn it out of everyone’s minds, but it was impossible.

Instead all he could do was let the word dig into him, carving a bloody mess as it searched for blood, reminding him, and everyone else how he was different from them. Amnesia already left gaping moth eaten holes in his identity, having the word traitor add more holes in was almost too much. Hajime wanted to gather himself into a small ball, preserve what he had, but deep down he knew it wouldn’t be enough.

“I guess it’s just you and me.” Nidai laughed, his voice bouncy and metallic, “Let’s start investigating!”

Hajime shoved his thoughts away. Right now, his focus should be on finding an exit to the Funhouse. Everything else could be put on hold. He hoped.

~

Missing so many self defense classes wasn’t a good idea. Hajime tried to stretch, to touch his toes, and felt a burning in his legs. The muscles refusing to move as Hajime did his best to stretch without over doing it. Souda was gasping along side him, sweat forming on his brow. Everything felt stiff,
not that Hajime was the most flexible person, but he liked to think he was a bit physically fit.

Pekoyama on the other hand looked comfortable stretching, practically folding over in half as she touched her toes. Every movement she did was fluid, graceful with hints of power behind her actions. There was something rippling behind Pekoyama’s body, coursing through her strongly. If Peko was a shape, Hajime mused, she’d be a collection of curvy, wavy lines.

“Finish your stretching and we’ll move onto some warm up activities.” Pekoyama’s voice rang against the wooden room.

“Okay…” Souda groaned, “We shouldn’t skip this again… I’m going to ache afterwards…”

“I know…” Hajime sympathetically agreed.

“This wouldn’t be a problem if you two just kept at it.” Pekoyama mused, cutting in, “Perhaps I should give you some exercises to do on your own? That way if we miss some lessons you won’t have to worry.”

“Maybe…” Souda rubbed his head, “As long as it’s not too complicated?”

“I’ll write some up and give you a list of exercises.” Pekoyama concluded, “Now, let’s start.”

Hajime wobbled over to Pekoyama, giving one final stretch in his arms. Despite the aches, he was going to feel afterwards, Hajime felt a flutter in his chest and a smile grace his face as Pekoyama started to talk.

~

“Good work.” Pekoyama praised, “You can release him now.”

Hajime let go of Souda’s arm and collapsed beside him on the floor. He was warm, sweaty, and aching. Leaning against Souda was too much. Crawling away, Hajime flopped onto the floor, liking the cool wood against his back. Souda was sprawled in a similar position, chest rising as he harshly gasped for air.

“Here.” Pekoyama sat down beside them, handing water, “You did a good job, both of you. This was a good session.”

“Glad you think so.” Souda croaked out, “I felt sluggish the entire time.”

“You’re just unused to moving in the ways Peko instructs you.”

Hajime turned a bit. Kuzuryuu was at the door, carrying a tray of sweets and tea, “How was practice?”

“Really? That’s good.” Kuzuryuu sat down beside Pekoyama, setting the tray down carefully, “I remember when we took self defense classes together. It was so frustrating to take it along Peko.” He told them, “She was so good and I moved at a snail’s pace.”

“You should join us.” Souda forced himself to sit up, taking a cookie, “It would be fun to do this along side you too.”

Kuzuryuu snorted, but looked at Pekoyama, “I mean, if you want me? I may not be as good as Peko, but I suppose I could also help teach a bit? I got the basics down.”
“Yeah, join us!” Hajime encouraged, “It will be like high school, when we all did gym class. Peko will still kick our asses.”

Souda laughed, “Yeah! Like in kendo season. I swear all our class ran away when paired with you.”

“Like you did,” Kuzuryuu fondly laughed, “Right into the wall.”

“Hey!” Souda smacked his hand against Kuzuryuu’s shoulder, “I tripped into the wall. Difference.”

“Yeah, by running away.” Hajime quipped.

“Oh, shut it both of you.” Souda laughed, “You two weren’t any better.”

“I tried to strategically avoid Peko.” Hajime defended himself.

“I lied to the teacher and said Peko was under a contract to not attack me.” Kuzuryuu said.

“What?” Souda gaped, “You… no wonder you somehow never got paired with her… you’re so bad.”

“Hey, I wasn’t going to risk my life.” Kuzuryuu shrugged.

“I… you are exaggerating.” Pekoyama’s cheeks were pink, “I toned down my skill in class…”

“You still struck fear in the hearts of our classmates.” Souda pointed out calmly before finishing his cookie.

Hajime snorted and Kuzuryuu choked back a laugh. Pekoyama’s face was still a bit pink, but her lips were pulling up into a small smile.

~

Hajime supposed that even after all the years of being woken up by a phone buzzing, he’d be used to it. Moaning into the pillow, Hajime pushed himself up, toppling over Komaeda, sleepily grabbing his phone, fingers moving like bloated worms as he fumbled to hit the correct buttons to unlock his phone. A text message sat in his inbox, one from Hanamura. Hajime opened the chat and stared, the characters not forming words for a good thirty seconds.

‘Sorry if I woke you, I dreamed of our introduction to each other and something about… loins? I think Sonia was there?’ – Hanamura

Loins? Hajime stared at the word for a long time. Like… pork tenderloins? He flopped back into the bed, feeling Komaeda snuggle up to him. Whatever Hanamura meant… it didn’t sound urgent. Shutting his phone off Hajime and fell back asleep.

~

Despite the large cup of coffee, Hajime was still rubbing his eyes, drooping over his canvas. The smell of paint burned chemically in his nose, pungent and artificial. Normally Hajime didn’t pay much attention, but now it smelt especially awful. Dipping his brush into the water he swirled it around, watching the clear liquid cloud up. Was he so unproductive that he had only used one colour? Hajime groaned and sat up, picking another colour.

Time passed, but Hajime wasn’t sure how long. Everything blurred between colour and the smell of paint. When the teacher announced a break Hajime’s brain felt sloshy and his body ached. Ungracefully he plopped his brush into the water and reached for his coffee. The cup was cold.
Hajime groaned. The debate on whether to drink his cold coffee for the caffeine or get a new hot cup raged in Hajime’s mind. If he wanted a new cup he’d have to leave the warm room and venture outside, where there was snow. But if he drank his coffee now it would make him feel cold. Plus, it was merely cool, not iced. There was a strange disconnect between a hot drink that was room temperature to a drink that was iced.

“Hinata?”

Hajime nearly jumped and looked up. One of his classmates was standing a bit away from him, shuffling a bit, pointing to the door, “Someone is here to see you? Said he didn’t want to come in?”

He? Hajime wobbly stood up, feeling his legs protest. “Uh thank you.”

“No problem.”

His classmate walked away, giving Hajime a clear path. Walking to the door, Hajime pushed it open. Standing a bit away was Komaeda. A few of his classmates lingered around, talking, and stretching. Hajime brushed past them and walked to Komaeda, who lifted a thermos up, smiling.

“You left home so quickly. June wanted to give you this.” Komaeda pressed the thermos into his hand, “It’s coffee. I think.” He smiled.

Hajime accepted the thermos, “Thank you. I was debating on buying a new cup of coffee. Guess I won’t have to anymore.”

“You’re welcome.” Komaeda lifted his hand, brushing Hajime’s bangs, “You look sleepy. Sorry…”

“It’s not your fault.” Hajime replied immediately, clasping his hand.

Komaeda smiled, “Also, I didn’t just come here to give you coffee. Sonia messaged me. She wants to see Tsumiki today, to check up on her. Want to join?”

Ah. Hajime hadn’t checked his phone since class started. He nodded, “That’s a good idea. Mitarai hasn’t messaged us about her… so I assumed all was fine… but a check up is good.”

“We’ll be leaving around three-thirty.” Komaeda said, “Meet us by the Health Science building, okay?”

“Sounds good.” Hajime tugged Komaeda’s hand, “We still have a bit of time left for our break. Want to see my painting?”

“Sure.” Komaeda agreed, lacing their fingers.

Hajime lead him inside. The people in the room were sparse. Skillfully dodging the canvases and bags on the floor, they stopped at Hajime’s easel. Komaeda stepped forward a bit, glancing at the painting.

“Do you have a new theme for this project?”

“We’re studying a still life.” Hajime pointed to the centre of the room, “Consider this a mini project. It’s nothing too exciting.”

Komaeda glanced over and raised an eyebrow, “A cattle’s skull?”

Hajime shrugged, “I didn’t pick the props.”
“I can think of worse things to paint.” Komaeda said calmly.

Hajime groaned and Komaeda laughed, “Too soon?”

“You’re… such a little shit.” Hajime rolled his eyes, “You should go. The class is about to begin.”

“Right.” Komaeda squeezed his hand, holding laughter, “See you later Hajime.”

Questions to whether Sonia was there, flew out the window the moment Hajime walked up to the building. A limo sat outside, black, and shiny. People milled around, trying to not stare, but their gazes always lingered for just a touch too long. Shuffling over, Hajime bit his lip. Did he have to knock on the door or something? Perhaps he should text Sonia and say he was outside? The tinted windows were so thick that the only windows with visibility were the driver’s.

His questions were answered when the door opened, the driver stepping out, straightening the lapels of his suit. Hajime stepped back a bit, but the driver walked over to the passenger’s side and opened the door, gesturing to him with his hand.

“Hinata-sama?” He asked.

Inside Hajime could see a glimpse of Sonia’s hair and the fluffiness of Komaeda’s. Giving a polite nod, Hajime got inside, the door shutting behind him once he was in. To his surprise Koizumi sat there, fiddling with her camera. Was she coming with them to see Tsumiki? Or was Sonia merely offering her a ride home?

“Hey Hajime.” Komaeda greeted.

“Hi.” Hajime sat down beside him. “Is this everyone?”

“Unfortunately.” Sonia replied, “Kuzuryuu and Peko have class. Souda has a group project, Owari is working, and Saionji is practicing.”

More like Saionji didn’t want to come. Not that Hajime was going to speculate that aloud. Nestling into the seat, Hajime felt the limo jolt as it began to move. Sonia pulled her phone out and quickly typed a message before putting it back in her purse.

“I texted Mitarai. They say we can just ring the bell when we arrive.” Sonia picked up a bag beside her, “Also, I bought cake. We can’t just go over without giving something.”

“Right.” Hajime nodded, “Does Tsumiki know we’re visiting?”

Sonia nodded, “I thought it best to let her know of our arrival. Mitarai agreed with me.”

Good. The last thing Hajime wanted was an awkward visit. Though it did bring up the question to why Koizumi was coming. Last time she saw Tsumiki there was barely a sentence between them. Why was she coming along now? As though he read his mind, Koizumi looked up from her camera, a scowl on her face, though a blush was forming along the bridge of her nose, dusting along her freckles.

“I just thought that Tsumiki might be stressed with so many boys coming to visit her.” Koizumi said, “The only other girl is Sonia.”

That was her reason? Hajime hid a smile. Could it be she was giving Tsumiki a chance?
“I see.” Komaeda said with almost a teasing tone in his voice, “How thoughtful.”

“Y-Yeah…” Koizumi’s fingers brushed her camera.

“I’m very glad!” Sonia beamed, “We don’t want Tsumiki on edge. This visit shall be pleasant.” She decreed.

The area looked the same as Hajime remembered it, save for the snow on the ground. Sonia was thanking their driver and arranging a pick-up time. Carefully Hajime stepped up the house that was Tsumiki and Mitarai’s. It was tall and narrow, a two-story place. All the houses around the area were, though there was an apartment complex at the end of the street. With all the snow the area looked clean and picturesque.

“Are you ready?” Sonia asked, walking up to them.

“Sure. Let’s go.” Hajime said.

Walking up to the house, Hajime rang the bell. Everyone crowded around. Behind the door, Hajime could hear footsteps and the lock turning. The door opened and Mitarai stepped back, smiling.

“Hello everyone.” They said, “Please come inside.”

The house was warm. Hajime gratefully stepped in, spotting a heater in the corner. The warm air nearly blasted his face, but he didn’t mind. Stepping out of his shoes, Hajime slipped into a pair of slippers left out for them.

“Mikan is in the kitchen.” Mitarai said, “It’s the door down the hall.”

Hajime slowly walked to the only door at the end of the hall, past a flight of stairs on his right, and opened the door. Inside the kitchen also had a heater, as well as a table. The room was divided in half, with a kitchen on one side and a tatami mat room on the other, though the door to the room was half shut. Tsumiki sat at the table, a plate of sweets in front of her and a pot of tea at her elbow.

“Hello Tsumiki.” Hajime waved.

“H-Hello H-Hinata…” She stood up, her chair scraping against the floor dully, “T-Thanks for coming o-ver. P-Please take a seat.”

Hajime walked in and sat down across from her. As he sat everyone else filed in, taking seats, and greeting Tsumiki. Komaeda sat beside him and Koizumi took the foot of the table. Sonia sat beside Tsumiki. Mitarai walked in and went into the kitchen, filling up the kettle, setting it on the stove.

“For later.” They said before walking back to the table, sitting down, “Thank you for coming to visit us.”

“Not a problem.” Sonia smiled and set her bag on the table, “I brought a cake. I wasn’t sure what everyone likes, so I hope it’s fine.”

“I’m sure you picked well.” Komaeda reassured, “Shall we cut it? Where is the knife?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Hajime saw Tsumiki flinch, her hands gripping her pants. Hajime blinked… was she reacting to something? Mitarai stood up and their movement diverted Hajime’s attention.
“Here, I’ll get some plates. The knives are in the block. You can take one.” They said.

“Right.” Komaeda stood up and walked over, picking a medium sized knife.

Sonia was unwrapping the cake, undoing the cardboard around it. The cake was chocolate with strawberries. Tsumiki was standing up slightly, hand shaking as she poured the tea. Koizumi was moving the tea cups to the seats. Hajime fidgeted. There was nothing for him to do. Instead he looked at Tsumiki, who was still shaking. The tea was poured and she was sitting down, yet she looked like she was about to collapse. Hajime glanced over to Komaeda. Was she reacting to him?

“Here.” Koizumi pushed the cup over, breaking his thoughts.

“Thanks.” Hajime accepted it and turned back to Tsumiki.

“Okay, let’s cut this.” Komaeda returned, standing in Sonia’s place.

Carefully he started to cut the cake in half, slicing evenly downward, before dividing it up. Mitarai started to serve the cake to everyone, pushing plates over to them. Tsumiki’s face was pale and she was shifting in her seat. This had to be a reaction to Komaeda and the knife, right?

“I’ll move this over to the sink.” Komaeda set picked up the remains of the cake’s packaging, “Where’s the garbage?”

“It’s beside the sink.” Mitarai said.

He left, taking the knife with him. Hajime eyed Tsumiki. She had slumped a bit in her chair, yet her eyes were following Komaeda slightly, not leaving him until he returned, no knife in hand. Carefully Hajime saw her exhale and sit up, picking her tea cup. Colour slowly filled her cheeks.

She… was reacting to Komaeda, Hajime concluded silently. Did that mean she remembered more than just the movie and the third island? If she did, was it fragmented? Hajime picked his fork up, twirling it a bit. Maybe if they were careful they could get a better picture.

“This is delicious.” Mitarai stated, “Where did you get it Sonia?”

“There is this bakery near my place.” Sonia replied, “Their cakes are always amazing.”

“I’ll have to check it out.” Mitarai sighed, “Maybe I’ll order a cake. Do you think they’ll be rushed?”

Sonia tapped her chin, “I think if you phone ahead… they’re relatively small so it might be all right.”

“I can phone later.” Mitarai looked over at Tsumiki, “How about it Mikan? Want to split the cost of a cake together?”

“O-oh…” Tsumiki nearly jumped, “Uh… yes that w-would be nice…”

Hajime speared a bit of his cake and ate it. The cake was moist and the icing not overly sweet. “So, uh Tsumiki how are you?” Hajime asked.

“I-I… I’m good.” Tsumiki stammered.

“I’m relieved.” Hajime smiled, “When you left the Improv I was worried you were sick.”

“N-No… nothing like t-that.” Tsumiki gave a firm nod, “I-I was fine b-by the time we g-got home.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” Sonia beamed, “And speaking of Improv, Tanaka has already informed me
of their performing times. I could let you know if you would like to see another performance?”

Mitarai smiled, “That would be great. We don’t usually get out much.”

“Y-Yes… t-thank you…” Tsumiki said as she picked her tea cup up.

“Also…” Sonia fidgeted, her face a bit pink, “I was thinking… we didn’t get to know you well during the Improv, so I want to throw a party.”

A party? Hajime nodded. That was a good idea. Without the distractions of the other people, they could learn more, see if Tanaka and Tsumiki remembered. “That sounds great Sonia.”

“Yes… we haven’t had a party since Christmas.” Komaeda pointed out.

“When are you thinking?” Mitarai asked.

Sonia began to ramble party information to Mitarai. Hajime drank a bit of his tea and stared at Tsumiki. Her face was flushed healthily and she was striking a conversation up with Koizumi. The contrast now to when Komaeda had the knife was stark. Leaning back, Hajime turned so only Komaeda could hear him.

“Tsumiki looked pale when you had the knife. I’m wondering…”

“If she was reacting to it?” Komaeda softly finished, “Maybe? This party Sonia is throwing will be good, to see if they remember.”

Hajime nodded. This felt like a lot. The last time someone took a long time to remember something was Komaeda. This dancing around was tough. Drinking the last of his tea, Hajime hoped something would come out of their party.

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“A party?” Hanamura’s eyes lit up.

“Yes, a party.” Sonia nodded her head, “Mainly to see Tsumiki and Tanaka together.”

“Together?” Hanamura rubbed his chin, “I never thought of them together, but if you think so…”

Pekoyama calmly coughed and Kuzuryuu shot a look. “Anyways, this is a good idea. Where are we going to host it?”

“At my place.” Sonia promptly replied, “It’s big enough to hold people and…”

Hanamura cleared his throat, “Might I suggest something?”

“Yes?” Sonia politely asked.

“Not that I am trying to insult your house, however I’ll be providing the main dishes for the night.” Hanamura’s voice seemed to dip suggestively at the words ‘main dishes’, “While I’m sure you’d be more than graceful in letting me use your kitchen, I’m far more comfortable in my kitchen. I know where things are, I got proper equipment, and I won’t have to worry about transporting them with a vehicle.”

“Isn’t your restaurant… I mean it’s a great place…” Souda started.

“Oh no, not my restaurant, though if you want to join me there you’re more than welcome.”
Hanamura winked at Souda, “No, I mean my house.”

Souda shuddered, but continued to talk, “Your house? Is that fine?”

“Of course,” Hanamura nodded, “It’s not as big as Kuzuryuu’s place, or most of the people here…” He glanced around the room, “But if it’s just us it shouldn’t be a problem, yes?”

Hajime saw his point. It was rather nice to hear Hanamura seamlessly offering a service, bringing his involvement with the group tangible, threads forming between them.

“I got no objections,” Koizumi shrugged her shoulders.

“No, you’re right. That isn’t a problem.” Mitarai said, “If everyone else is fine with that?”

“All right!” Owari pumped her fists, “Let’s do this! I’m excited!”

“Then it’s settled.” Pekoyama nodded her head, “If you could tell us your address Hanamura?”

“I’ll make sure to message it to you.” Hanamura said. “Along with any dish suggestions.”

“We can buy the ingredients for you.” Kuzuryuu muttered, “So let me know what you’ll need.”

“Also,” Komaeda spoke, “Do you want any help preparing anything?”

“Help? Well I can think of some people I wouldn’t mind help from… willing volunteers…” Hanamura’s gaze slid around the room.

Saionji coughed loudly and her eyes narrowed into a glare, her arms crossed. Pekoyama’s glare was subtle, but Hajime could feel the black iciness seeping into the room. Hanamura gulped and smoothed his hair, hands shaking a bit.

“Uh… I mean… I got it under control… I can do it myself…”

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‘A gummy cake. With a lot of gummy candies.’ – Saionji

‘But no lemon ones!’ – Saionji

‘Or chocolate squares with gummies.’ – Saionji

‘I also like mousse desserts.’ – Saionji

‘… you can’t only request desserts…’ – Hanamura

‘I can do what I want!’ – Saionji

‘He’s right… that’s not good for you…’ – Hajime

‘Shut up Hinata!’ – Saionji

‘Now, now, no need to argue… I can make a few desserts…’ – Hanamura

‘I WANT MEAT!!!’ – Owari

‘ANY KIND OF MEAT IS GOOD!’ – Owari
‘What the? You are meat obsessed…’ – Saionji

‘Says the girl who requested only desserts…’ – Kazuichi

‘Shut up you grease monkey!’ – Saionji

‘Please cease this bickering!’ – Sonia

‘We can have both meat and desserts!’ – Sonia

‘Though as a warning, Tanaka doesn’t eat meat.’ – Sonia

‘As long as the desserts have gummies!’ – Saionji

‘… right… I’m making note…’ – Hanamura

‘Does this extend to all kinds of meat including fish?’ – Hanamura

‘No. He’ll eat fish.’ – Sonia

‘You can’t only request sweets and meat!’ – Fuyuhiko

‘So far the grocery list consists of dessert and meat only.’ – Fuyuhiko

‘Hey, I was going to suggest some vegetables.’ – Mitarai

Waking up to a buzzing phone wasn’t new, but it still was not fun. Hajime sat up and picked his phone off the desk. At least Owari wasn’t phoning too early… answering it Hajime leaned against the bed, idly picking at his blanket. Komaeda groaned and shifted towards Hajime. Hajime dropped his hand and idly played with Komaeda’s hair. The ringing stopped. Hajime barely opened his mouth when he heard sobbing on the other end, followed by some hiccups. Hajime sat up straighter, his heart stilling and breath growing shallow.

“H-Hajime…” Owari’s voice weakly came across, “I’m so sorry.”

Sorry? Hajime felt his mind disconnect. What was she sorry for? He scrambled, trying to think what she could possibly mean, but she continued.

“I… I tried to eat.” Owari stammered, sobs growing stronger, “I really, really tried… but the moment it hit my stomach… I…” She broke down.

What? Hajime’s blood stilled, slowly icing over, frost breathing inside of him, chilling his insides. What did… Owari mean? She wasn’t… Hajime forced air through his lungs, feeling a burn inside, like icicles had formed slowly, stabbing his organs.

“Owari… I’m… confused…”

“C-confused?” Owari gasped, “I-It… it happened again Hajime!” She proclaimed, “Eating. I can’t eat… every time I try… I just… please Hajime… I don’t want to be alone… why aren’t you here?”

This… felt familiar… Hajime’s mind narrowed down, flashing to Kuzuryuu with his eye. Was Owari experiencing the same… thing? Whatever it was… he couldn’t ignore it. Dropping his hand from Komaeda’s hair he stood up and began to search for his clothes, balancing the phone against his ear. In the distance, Hajime heard Komaeda sit up, the blankets shifting as he got out of bed.
“Owari. Please tell me where you are.”

“I… I’m in a house?” Owari replied.

“No… I mean…” Hajime felt a bit of a burn. Why didn’t he know her address? “I mean your address.”

“Address?” Owari dully repeated, “I… I… I don’t know…” She started to gasp.

“Owari… please… breathe deeply.” Hajime swallowed thickly, “I’ll be over. Just… hold on please.”

“Okay…”

Hajime hung up and quickly searched through his contacts as he pulled out a pair of jeans and a shirt. Dialing the number, Hajime balanced his phone again, wiggling out of his pants as he did so. In the background, Komaeda was sitting up. The dial tone buzzed in his ear consistently.

“Pick up, pick up…” Hajime muttered as he fumbled into his jeans.

On the fifth ring, he heard a click. Hajime sprung, “Koizumi. I need Owari’s address now.”


“Not now.” Hajime plead, “I’ll explain later… just… please.”

“Okay… you better. I’ll text it to you…” Koizumi muttered as the phone call dropped.

Hajime threw his phone on the bed and scrambled to button and zip his pants up. Grabbing his shirt, he watched as the screen lit up, showing the message. Komaeda was out of bed, stretching before wrapping his arms around Hajime’s shoulder. His body was warm from the blankets and from their shared body heat. Hajime fumbled a bit with his shirt, slightly shaking in Komaeda’s grasp.

“Nagito… I need to put my shirt on…”

“What’s wrong?” Komaeda asked as he let go.

With a scramble, Hajime began to pull his shirt on, flailing a bit as he pulled it over his head, “Um something is wrong with Owari.”

“Okay.” Komaeda began to pull clothes out of his dresser, slipping a shirt on, grabbing some boxers and jeans.

Pulling his GPS up, Hajime put the address in and located his keys on the night stand. Checking the route, Hajime picked the quickest path.

“Done.” Komaeda said, “Let’s go.”

They slipped out, Hajime making a beeline to his car. Komaeda easily slipped into the passenger’s seat while Hajime started the car and handed his phone over to Komaeda.

“I’ve started the route.”

“Okay.” Komaeda took the phone. “You’ll want to take a left out of here.”

The drive was silent, save for Komaeda occasionally giving directions. Hajime’s mind wanted to wander, to think of what was wrong with Owari, but he had to shove that in the back and focus on
driving. The day was still early and traffic slow. Hajime was thankful. His foot stepped on the gas a bit too hard and he was slightly over the speed limit. Their drive took them to a residential area, one where the housing was cheap. Hajime glanced at the rows and rows of apartments. Cars were parked on the street and he prayed that there was a place for him.

“Here.” Komaeda suddenly said, “This building.”

The building in question was an almost sickly green, mutated into a grey. Hajime quickly located the side of the road and pulled over. There was no indication if he could park there, but he didn’t care. The road was narrow, but he was over enough that if a car did want to pass, it could.

“Koizumi’s text says Owari is on the fifth floor, apartment 6C.” Komaeda rattled off.

“Okay.”

Hajime glanced around. The door was electronic. On the side was the intercom button. Hajime located the correct floor and room and pressed the buzzer. Tapping his foot, Hajime bit his lip. Was Owari okay? Would she be able to answer? What if she didn’t? Along the side was an emergency escape stairwell that spiralled downward. If worse came to worse maybe they could use that? There was a lock, but maybe they could break it?

Static emerged from the speaker. Hajime jumped.

“H-Hello?”

Scrambling Hajime pressed the button, “It’s me. Hajime. Owari?”

“H-Haji…” Her voice shakily came out.

“We’re here.” Hajime spoke quickly, “Let us inside?”

“R-right…”

The static disappeared. A second later a buzz came from the door. Komaeda immediately pulled it and they walked inside. An elevator was on the far wall and a door with stairs on the other side. Hitting the button to the elevator, Hajime waited.

“You’re tapping your foot.” Komaeda gently grabbed Hajime’s hand, “Owari answered and didn’t sound panicked.”

Hajime squeezed Komaeda’s hand, “R-right… I’m just… first Fuyuhiko then Sonia… they’re not frequent but something is wrong… it’s like… they’re awake but their mind is still in a dream.”

“I know…” Komaeda hummed, “I don’t know what exactly is happening…”

The elevator dinged, the door opening. It was a bit cramped inside, probably only able to hold up to ten or eleven people. Hajime pressed the fifth floor’s button and waited. The elevator jerkily started, vibrating as it went up slowly. The lights for the floors seemed to light up slowly, crawling to the next one. When they finally reached the floor Hajime nearly ripped his hand out of Komaeda’s as he pulled him out.

Following the doors, Hajime read the numbers and letters carefully until they got to 6C. Outside was a small buzzer. Hajime hit the button. He barely took his finger off when the door opened, Owari poking her head out.
“H-Hajime!” She exclaimed, “You’re…” Her voice trailed off, “Komaeda?” Her voice carefully said the name.

“Hi.” Komaeda waved, “We received your call. We were worried…”

“Your hair is all wrong.” Owari opened the door further, her eyebrows knitting together, “It’s… not white?”

White? Like in the dreams? Hajime turned slightly to Komaeda, who was tugging at the ends of his hair, looking down.

“Uh… yes… it’s not white…” He muttered.

“Never mind that.” Hajime steered the conversation, “What’s wrong Owari?”

“I… I tried to eat. I really, really did!” Owari’s eyes watered, “But all I could think of was… how it would sit in my stomach… all heavy and slimy…” She began to cry, sinking to the floor.

“It’s fine Owari. You’re all right.” Hajime assured her softly, knelling.

Hajime pulled her into a side hug, trying to shuffle away from the door so Komaeda could come in and properly shut the door. Owari moved along with him, huddling into his arms, practically half throwing herself at him as her tears began to sink into Hajime’s clothes. He kept rubbing her shoulders and watched as Komaeda walked into the apartment, returning a moment later with a box of tissues. Sitting at her other side, Komaeda held onto the box and reached to touch her other shoulder.

“T-Thank you…”

Owari reached over and tried to grab a tissue. Her fingers bumped into the box a couple of times before she successfully grabbed a tissue. She pulled away from Hajime, wiping her eyes. She grabbed another handful of tissues and blew her nose.

“It’s no problem.” Hajime assured her, “I’m glad you’re not injured.”

“Injured?” Owari blew her nose again, “No… I wouldn’t do that… you have enough problems with…” Her voice trailed off, but her gaze flickered to Komaeda, “A-Anyways… I suppose you’ll want to do a check up?”

A check up?

“Like a doctor?” Komaeda blurted out.

“Yes?” Owari cocked her head, brow furrowing.

First Kuzuryuu at the hospital… then… Owari… why were they acting like Hajime was a doctor? He glanced at Komaeda, who shrugged his shoulders slightly. They had to do something… Hajime took a deep breath.

“Okay, first let’s move out of your entry.” Hajime said, “To the kitchen.” He requested.

Owari nodded and they walked into the kitchen, just around a small corner. There was barely enough room for a sink, a small stove, and a fridge, but Owari also had a little table. Komaeda walked in and sat down, Owari following. Hajime bit his lip. Now that they were in the kitchen… what was he supposed to do?
“I’ll text everyone.” Komaeda suddenly said, “Especially Koizumi.”

“Koizumi?” Owari sat up, “She’s awake?”

Awake? Like from the Program? Hajime raised an eyebrow, but jumped on the opportunity. Perhaps Owari could tell them something and distract her long enough so Hajime didn’t have to fake a check up for long.

“Yes, she’s awake. What do you remember?” Hajime asked as he walked over to her, grabbing her wrist, trying to locate her pulse.

Owari let him, like it was a natural occurrence for him to do so. “People started to wake up… from the Program because of that program you created… an Alter Ego?” Owari cocked her head, “I don’t remember Koizumi waking up… or Komaeda.” She looked at him.


She turned and gave him a look, “Are you teasing me Haji? You know I don’t remember much. Only what the files said.”

Files… so when they woke up they didn’t remember the Program? They didn’t remember the killing? Why? Hajime frowned. The reasons behind their inclusion to the Program was hazy, but to not remember it? There had to be a reason.

“Files?” Komaeda prompted.

“Yes… the reports.” Owari sucked in a breath, “Just the basics. We don’t need… any more nightmares.”

Nightmares. The word sent shivers up his spine. All the dreams, all the drawings he had done over the years accumulated in his mind. Every event was terrifying. Dead bodies, mutilated bodies, executions… yet Owari was suggesting they had other sources for nightmares. At once his brain flashed to the destroyed city, Kamukura, the Project, Komaeda cutting his arm off willingly… those were connected, but how, Hajime wasn’t sure. He looked carefully at Owari. Something had happened. Something to the world, to them. Something so bad that Komaeda considered and went through cutting his arm off. Hajime paled. If Komaeda willingly cut his arm off what did the others do? His stomach twisted a bit as the answers easily floated to his mind. Kuzuryuu with his eye… Owari… with starvation? It had to be the answer. Should he ask her? Would asking her risk something? Was it a risk he should take?

He didn’t have to make a choice. Komaeda’s phone began to buzz loudly, accompanied by a loud tune. He jumped up, barely noticing their stares on him, as he answered, walking a bit out of the room. Owari turned back to Hajime, eyes wide, blinking at him. Hajime shuffled under her gaze and was about to open his mouth when Owari stood up and reached over, poking him.

“Hajime?” She asked.

“Yes?” Hajime promptly answered in a quick gasp.

“You’re… why are you in my apartment?” Owari’s voice rose a bit.

What? Hajime stared and waited for Owari to tell him she was joking, but her gaze was level. His throat felt dry as he scrambled to locate the words to speak to her… to talk properly and explain.

“Uh… you asked us to come here?” Hajime slowly said, phrasing feeling cluttered, “Owari?”
Her complexion paled. Owari collapsed into the chair, the force making the chair scrape rather loudly against the tile. She looked down at the table and back at Hajime, breathing shallow. Hajime slowly walked over to the sink, opening a cabinet, grabbing a glass. He filled it with water and brought it over to her. Owari immediately took the glass and drank the contents in one gulp.

“W-What did I do?” Owari softly asked, “I didn’t… do anything weird?”

“Nothing weird.” Hajime assured her, “You phoned me and told me you couldn’t eat without feeling ill. We came over after asking Koizumi for your address.” Hajime added.

“Ohay…” Owari swallowed.

Komaeda returned to the kitchen, “Sorry, it was my mother asking about…” He paused and looked at Owari, “Hey… are you okay Owari?”

“K-Komaeda?” Owari stammered before relaxing, “Well Hajime did say ‘we’…” She let up a dry laugh.

“Owari?” Komaeda looked over at Hajime.

Hajime shrugged, “She… snapped out of… whatever was happening before.”

“How much do you remember Owari?” Komaeda took the situation in stride, sitting beside her.

“Not much… I remember cleaning up and getting ready for bed… I think I dreamed something?” Owari’s brow furrowed, “I sort of remember getting up, but everything is hazy… I knew I was up and doing things, but it cut in and out.”

Her explanation made Hajime’s heart jolt. First Kuzuryuu, then Sonia. What was happening? This had to be linked to their dreams, but why now? The two cases before were suddenly not feeling like isolated incidents, but rather, connected to something. Hajime frowned. Their knowledge of the dreams was largely centered around the Island. Events before and after were hazy, unclear. Did they have to sort those out too? Perhaps Hajime should consider starting another sketchbook… separate from the Island… his hand cramped in response.

Komaeda’s phone chimed again. He looked down, “It’s… everyone…” His mouth twisted, “Their messages are all coming at once…” He scrolled a bit, “They’re all worried about you Owari.” He began to type, “I’ll update everyone now.”

Owari shuffled in the seat, face still pale, as silence, thick and opaque, oozed out of the walls. Hajime wanted to stand up, move around the kitchen, or speak, but it was filling his mouth, sluggishly curling in his bones, drowning him, consuming him. The clock on the wall ticked, counting down. What it was counting down to, Hajime wasn’t sure.

~

Everyone stuffed themselves into the back of Hanamura’s restaurant, all in various degrees of presentable. Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama were perfect, down to the press of his collar and the crisply tied bows in her hair. Sonia also looked graceful, hair braided, a scarf of multi-colours around her neck. But everyone else had something slightly off about them. Owari hadn’t changed out of her sleepwear, though she did have socks and a coat on. Saionji’s kimono was bright and gorgeous as usual, but the obi was slightly crooked, the bow a bit loose. Koizumi’s hair was a bit messy, and she was yawning, hiding her mouth behind her hand. Her socks were slightly mismatched, the grey in one a few shades lighter than the other. Souda’s hair was jammed under a beanie, probably to hide the fact he hadn’t combed it. His shirt also spotted several grease stains, especially at the hem.
Hanamura had flour on his scarf and fingers, though he was discreetly trying to wipe them off on his apron. Finally, Mitarai’s shirt was backwards and their hair askew.

“S-Sorry…” Owari shivered, “I-I’m causing a lot of trouble.”

“No need to worry,” Hanamura beamed, “Troublesome things are often worth it in the end.”

Owari still managed a bit of a glare. Hanamura wilted and tried again. “I mean… sometimes things seem troublesome and they really aren’t…”

“Let’s hear what happened.” Sonia calmly said, probably saving Hanamura from digging himself into a hole.

“I… I was asleep… I dreamed about something… I sort of remember getting up and doing things… but next thing I know Hajime and Komaeda are in my apartment, telling me I phoned them and I let them in.”

“Hinata phoned me earlier this morning.” Koizumi confirmed, “He wanted to know Akane’s address.”

“Right, because I didn’t know where she lived.” Hajime said, “She phoned me this morning, sounding distressed. When we got there she… talked about not being able to eat and then treated me like I was her doctor.”

Pekoyama sat up straighter, “Like Fuyuhiko did at the hospital?”

“Yes, exactly like that.” Hajime nodded, “She talked about the Program… about people waking up. Apparently… when we woke up we didn’t remember it. She mentioned something about reports and said it was only basic, that we didn’t need any more nightmares.”

“So, what was the point of us witnessing and experiencing…” Saionji’s voice trailed off, getting lower, “that… Killing Game? I mean… we were put into a sort of Virtual Reality, just to kill everyone… and then forgot about it? If so, what was the point?”

“Doesn’t it have something to do with us being called... Ultimate Despair?” Souda asked, “I mean… that’s not a friendly title… we had to do something to be called that, right?”

When he put it like that, suddenly Hajime felt a piece slot into place. His face warmed and felt silly, his mind berating him for forgetting and not connecting things sooner. They had to do something to earn that title…

“So, when I… uh…” Komaeda gestured to his left arm, “Does that count? I did that to myself.”

“And when I… on Fuyuhiko’s orders killed that… person…” Pekoyama muttered.

Sonia equally paled, “Those girls…” She leaned back.

“What if,” Mitarai calmly spoke, “Something happened to the Program?”

“What do you mean?” Komaeda asked.

“Owari said that the reports were only basic, that we didn’t need the nightmares. She’s implying that something else has happened to us, something scary. If that’s the case, why put us into a Program just to kill each other? She implied that nightmares are the last thing we needed.”

Hajime felt like his body was crumbling. If they were right… then… something happened before the
Program. Something terrible enough that the city was destroyed and they were called Ultimate Despair. The Program was linked to that, but if Mitarai was correct…

“Then you’re saying the Program was a good thing?” Koizumi asked, “We were killing each other…”

“But… we didn’t want to in the beginning…” Kuzuryuu pointed out, “Remember? That’s why in the first Trial we all were… disturbed with Komaeda’s actions… how he manipulated…” He didn’t need to finish the sentence. Hanamura shuffled loudly enough to finish the phrase.

“Yet we continued.” Souda pointed out, “We had other Trials.”

“I think… the beginning is important…” Pekoyama said, “Our first intentions weren’t malicious… an if you think about it… all the islands are harmless on their own. Yet things out of our control occurred, manipulating the setting, pushing us to kill.”

Hajime’s mind flashed to the Despair Disease. The illness wasn’t a real one… so it had to be something inflicted on them for a reason. To cause anxiety and panic? It worked… he grimaced. Tsumiki killed two people and including her, four people were inflicted with the illness.

“So, you’re saying the Program served another purpose?” Hanamura asked, “What kind of purpose?”

The answer felt so close. Hajime wanted to fill everything in, but his brain couldn’t. Why would someone or a group of people stick them into a Program, only to let it change in a way that caused them to start killing each other? Was that the Program’s end goal? Security before the harsh reality was dropped on them?

“Anyways…” Kuzuryuu took them back on track, “Owari, you said you’re fine… but…” His brow furrowed, “Is everything okay?”

“I… I think so…” Owari nodded, “Though… if it’s all right… could I stay with you Mahiru? Just for a bit? I don’t want to… be alone if it happens again.”

“Sure.” Koizumi immediately agreed, “You’re welcome at my place.”

“Should we maybe cancel the party?” Sonia raised her hand, “It’s tomorrow and… I don’t want to push anyone…”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Owari firmly said, “We need to have this party. It will be good to see Tsumiki and Tanaka. Not that remembering is the only reason we want to hang out with them…”

“She’s right.” Mitarai agreed, “This will be good for all of us regardless if they remember or not.”

~

Hajime was floating, gently, downwards, almost peacefully. His heart felt warm, comfortable, as he sunk lower and lower. Gravity felt almost non-existent as he slowly touched the ground, opening his eyes. The floor, the endless void around him, was made of glass. People walked, angular and symmetrical, like crystal sculptures. They all reflected different colours, some red, some orange, some yellow… the went all through the colours in a rainbow, warmly glowing as they walked around. Hajime moved along them, never touching, only looking. He walked, and walked, no destination in mind, just a mindless urge, a silent need to move.

The light in the area began to change, the colours started to shift in the people, fluctuating between
Hajime kept walking, walking until the seemingly endless void started to end, into a large circle. Standing at the end was Kamukura, hair long, suit black, red eyes staring at him. Hajime stopped and stared at him, tilting his head. Their gazes met and the room suddenly began to shrink, like it wanted to bring them together without making them move. Hajime could only watch as their distance closed, the circle getting smaller, until they were less than an arm length away.

Kamukura lifted his arm, bending it, and gently touched Hajime square in the chest. Something rippled in the room, starting from Kamukura, all the way through the walls and floor, like he was the cause of an earthquake. His mouth twitched, ever so slightly before he turned around and ran.

The edge of the room collapsed around him as he ran into it, shattering, and breaking, like a thousand piece of glass. Hajime could barely breathe for a moment, before he ran after him.

Chapter End Notes

Hanamura: Writing him has been a lot more fun than I realized at first...

Heater Off: Most home heaters in Japan use kerosene (it always sounds so dangerous when I write it) as such burning it without an outlet for the fumes isn't good. Thus, most heaters say to not burn for more than an hour before you air the room out a bit (at least, that's what my heater says... others are different).

Calligraphy: Is a very difficult art. There are actual grades of calligraphy and people can get certificates to show what grade they are at.

Cattle Skull: My art department in my University had a real one they brought out during still life proportions.

Cake Shop: The amount of specialty cake stores in Japan is amazing and I love it. (And guilty of buying slices every so often when I'm in the city... oops...)

Tanaka: Okay, so I decided to make Tanaka a vegetarian, but only for red meat and chicken. I did this because allergy and eating regulations (for health or personal reasons) are still sort of a novelty in Japan (ie: they don't see it often and so it's not a common thing for many people to see).

Fish: Also, I made it so he eats fish because with Japan not being as aware of said allergies or personal eating choices, I think living in Japan and not eating fish is very difficult.

Their Talk: Okay I got a list of dream stuff in a notebook (I kid you not), but I realized they haven't been piecing together things outside of the Program as often so... I took the scene to do that because... I'm forgetful as hell and honestly this should have happened sooner... (sorry!)

The Dream: I am so excited to write this dream, even though it's similar to one I got going in Waking... I got reasons. (Bonus points for people who can figure out the music video that inspired the dream.)
Blackouts For Our Parties

Chapter Notes

Hello!

I am FINALLY DONE this chapter. It's a bit shorter than what I like, but I felt like this was a good place to end it. I'm sorry this took me so long. The main reason is... the party... I love writing everyone, but having everyone in the same room is... challenging @_@. I hope the scene turned out okay... I tried to add stuff in. (I'm just worried it would be clunky.)

Thank you, as always, for the support. I love this story and I wouldn’t be writing this much (my word document has 200 pages now!) on my own (or be as motivated to write, I suppose). Please feel free to leave a kudos or comment. Not needed, but they always make my day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hajime didn’t take a moment to look at the number calling him. Hitting the green circle, Hajime accepted the call and flopped back into Komaeda’s bed. Komaeda in turn slowly snuggled back up to him. His breathing was even, but with all the shifting, Hajime knew Komaeda was waking up gradually.

“Good morning.” Hajime greeted.

“Good morning Hinata.”

Mitarai’s voice rang through, smooth, pleasant. There was a lift to their voice on the phone they didn’t have in person. An almost smooth cadence to their tone. It was reminiscent of people for help desks or secretaries for companies.

“It’s not too early to phone, is it?” Mitarai followed up.

“No, it’s fine.” Hajime replied, “I’ve had phone calls earlier than this.”

“I’ll make note of that.” Mitarai lightly laughed, “Anyways, I dreamed something.”

“Okay.” Hajime carefully acknowledged.

“It isn’t anything too bad,” Mitarai mused, “Just a bit strange. I was running through a destroyed city, smoke, ash, just like those post apocalyptic movies show. My vision was filtered into a sort of green tinge. I think I was wearing some kind of night vision goggles.”

“Was there anyone else?” Hajime prompted, slowly trying to envision the dream. It wasn’t hard. The destroyed city was almost etched into his mind. He could taste the smoke on his lips and the sharpness of ash in each breath.

“No, just me… but I was wearing a suit.” They added.

“A…” Hajime paused his thoughts, “A suit?”
“It was important to me.” Hajime could hear the shrug in Mitarai’s voice, “The clothes I was wearing were very important to me.” I think… I was ‘Togami’ in this dream too.”

“Okay,” Hajime mentally noted, “Any clues we get are helpful.”

Togami… there had to be a reason why Mitarai chose to be Togami Byakuya. Perhaps Togami was also influential like the company?

“Agreed.” Mitarai said, “Though I didn’t get a lot from the dream…”

“It’s fine.” Hajime assured.

“Thank you Hinata. I hope this is helpful. I best be going.”

“Okay.” Hajime felt Komaeda wiggle closer to him, “Talk to you later.”

“See you.”

The call disconnected. Hajime set his phone down just in time for Komaeda to nearly tackle him into the mattress. Their weight dipped and Hajime felt himself sink a bit down, Komaeda on top, straddling his waist comfortably. His hair was in all sorts of directions and there was a crease on his cheek from the pillow, yet Hajime’s heart swelled. Komaeda looked so gorgeous as his eyes fluttered open, adjusting to the light. A yawn escaped his lips and despite all common sense telling Hajime morning breath was nowhere near ideal, he wanted to kiss Komaeda.

“Good morning Hajime.” Komaeda softly muttered.

“Good morning Nagito.” Hajime replied, lifting a hand to cart through Komaeda’s bed head, “Sleep well?”

“Always do with you in my arms.” Komaeda answered.

There was a twisting and jumping in his heart. Hajime felt his cheeks pull upwards, his mouth smiling. A warmth flooded his cheeks before he coughed.

“That was corny.” Hajime said, ducking his head, looking away.

“But you’re blushing.” Komaeda pointed out laughing, “Come on Haji… look at me…”

Warm fingers curled under Hajime’s chin and with a gentle tug, turned Hajime’s gaze back. Light flickered and danced in Komaeda’s eyes as he leaned forward and carefully kissed Hajime, gentle and chaste. Hajime arched into it, enjoying the slight pressure and warmth, but pulled away before it got too heavy.

“I can’t convince you to just stay the rest of winter?” Komaeda asked with a cheeky tone.

Hajime swallowed at the offer, feeling the warmth of the bed and Komaeda on top of him. It was comforting, languid like water lapping at his feet. Agreeing would be easy, but he shook his head.

“I don’t want to impose.”

“I know.” Komaeda nodded, “We better get up then. I bet your place is both cold and dusty.”

“Hey!” Hajime lightly smacked Komaeda’s arm, “I went back recently to clean up a bit…”

“It will still be cold.” Komaeda laughed, getting off Hajime quickly, avoiding another smack. “If we
hurry we can be back home in time for dinner.”

Hajime nodded before the words registered in his mind. Gasping he sat up and lunged for Komaeda, who shrieked with laughter mingling. Darting out of the bed, Komaeda fell forward, face first. Hajime managed to grab his legs.

“You… I’m not coming back here for dinner.” Hajime protested.

“Too late you agreed!” Komaeda argued, wiggling away, flopping stomach first onto the floor as he got out of Hajime’s arms.

“I…” Hajime sighed, another smile stretching his face, “Fine… just tonight though.”

“Thanks Hajime!” Komaeda sang as he waltzed to the bathroom.

A smile was on Hajime’s face. He shook his head and looked around. Sure, he would miss Komaeda’s room, but that had to do more with the person than the space, as cheesy as it was to admit it. All it would mean was making Komaeda come over to his place to make up for it.

~

His place was cold, as expected, but the dust was at a minimal. Hajime immediately turned the heaters on and bustled around, not taking his jacket off yet. Tossing his bag into his room, Hajime went back to the kitchen, turned the water on, and started the kettle.

“Wow… it is cold in here…” Komaeda sighed, “I can see my breath.”

“I know…” Hajime winced, “Let’s give the heaters a moment to warm the place up.”

“Right… I’m going to your room.” Komaeda announced, “So I can stand by the heater in there.”

“Knock yourself out.” Hajime laughed, “I’m going to turn the rest of the water on.”

Forcing himself to walk to his bathroom, Hajime turned the water on, turning the knobs and testing. After satisfied the sink and bathroom were functioning, Hajime returned to the kitchen. Grabbing two mugs and a teapot, Hajime selected green tea. Waiting and tapping his foot for the kettle, Hajime nearly threw himself on it when it clicked to signal completing. Filling the teapot, Hajime grabbed everything and carefully made his way back to his room. Komaeda was indeed in front of the heater, though he was making himself useful and throwing Hajime’s clothes into the hamper.

“Tea’s done.” Hajime set the tea and mugs on his desk.

“Thank you, Hajime.” Komaeda threw a pair of pants into the hamper.

“I see you’ve started to organize my laundry.” Hajime sat beside him, “Let me help.”

Sitting beside him, Hajime began to unpack, organizing his clean clothes, opening his closet to start putting things away. The room was warmer and Hajime shed his coat some point in time during the work, though he did put it on again when he moved some toiletries back to his bathroom. Thankfully his second heater had filled the kitchen and living area with heat, so the journey wasn’t too bad. Turning it off, Hajime walked back to his room, shutting the door behind him.

His suitcase was empty and most of his clothes put away. “Thanks.” Hajime smiled.

“No problem.” Komaeda pushed the now empty suitcase into a corner, “I’m surprised it’s so clean in here.”
“Yeah, yeah,” Hajime rolled his eyes, “I told you earlier…”

“Guess we’ll definitely be back in time for dinner.” Komaeda continued.

Dinner. Right. He had agreed to go back. Hajime smiled. Sure, it defeated the purpose of going back to his place only to have dinner (and presumably stay the night) with Komaeda, but Hajime didn’t mind. Gently he reached out and touched Komaeda’s arm.

“You know I’ll always come back to visit you.” Hajime assured.

Komaeda flushed and lightly smacked his hand away, “I’m not worried about that… though it’s nice to have you over…”

Hajime laughed and pulled Komaeda into a hug.

~

“No! Not like that!” Saionji huffed loudly in his ear.

Hajime’s face burned and he gripped the calligraphy brush tighter. It felt sweaty and unstable in his hand. Staring at the paper in front of him, Hajime couldn’t help but feel his heart sink. His lines were either too big or too thin. There was a wobbliness to his strokes and his kanji looked lopsided, warped like plastic melting in a summer day.

“Sorry…” Hajime muttered, “I’m trying…”

“You’re supposed to be an artist.” Saionji sighed.

“Doing calligraphy is different from painting.” Hajime protested, “Painting can be messy, but calligraphy…”

“Maybe you need a break?” Koizumi suggested at his other side, “Take a breather before trying again?” She pointed to the scraps of paper littering the table.

Hajime set the brush down and stretched, feeling his shoulder pop and muscles ache. Koizumi moved and began to clean up, setting the materials off the side. Saionji had stood up and carried a tray of tea and sweets over, plopping it down in front of them.

“Thank you.” Hajime accepted the tea.

“No problem.” Saionji sat down, devouring a cookie whole, “I just…” She muttered after she ate it in record time, “I just am baffled at how bad you are at this.”

“Gee thanks.” Hajime winced at her words.

“I mean that as a compliment to you.” Saionji quickly covered, “You paint, right? Calligraphy is just another form of painting, just with kanji.”

“Yeah…” Hajime sighed, “I just… it’s not the brush. I could paint with the ink.” He laughed hollowly, “I just tense up with the lines. Suddenly it becomes a challenge to write, to remember the order.”

“So, it’s like performance anxiety?” Saionji summed up. “Perhaps we should start with easier kanji?”

Her suggestion was perfectly acceptable, but Hajime felt his face burn hotter. It was like he was back in elementary school. Gripping the tea cup Hajime stared at his hands. He was an artist… this
shouldn’t be as hard as he was making it out to be…

“Here!” Saionji shoved the tray away and replaced it with the calligraphy, complete with a new sheet of rice paper. “Write ‘nichi’ instead,” she suggested.

Hajime gaped, the protest about tea being cut very abruptly replaced with a burning pile of embarrassment, “Are you kidding me? That’s like… elementary school kanji.”

“You’re the one struggling with kanji.” Saionji shrugged, her voice not wavering, “Come on, it’s like five strokes. I could pick one with fewer?”

“No! That’s fine…” Hajime picked the brush up and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

“Make sure to keep your pressure even.” Saionji quipped beside him, “Take your brush off completely after you’re done your lines so it looks crisp.”

Slowly, carefully, Hajime began to work, keeping Saionji’s advice in the front of his mind. The simplicity of the kanji helped. Years of painting flooded into his hand, making Hajime move almost on autopilot. Concentrating, he made a line, starting up and going down. Taking the brush off completely after he moved onto the horizontal line, going left to right, before starting the next line down. Making sure they were even, he moved to do the line inside before he finished the box. Staring at his work, Hajime dropped the brush and smiled. It wasn’t crooked and the lines looked decent.

“See?” Saionji beamed, “And you were complaining about the kanji choice. It looks much better than your previous attempts.”

A flash of a camera made the answer Hajime was going to say blank from his mind. Koizumi grinned beside him, moving over so she could get a better picture. Hajime frowned and tried to move, to cover his calligraphy, but knowing Koizumi she had already taken pictures while he wasn’t paying attention.

“Looking better Hinata.” Koizumi encouraged, “If only we did this earlier… would have saved time.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Hajime groaned, “Did you have to take a picture?”

“Documenting important journeys is my job.” Koizumi factually said, “You’ll thank me later. These turned out great. Do you want to see?”

“No thanks.” Hajime sighed, “I’m sure you’ll show me later Koizumi.”

“I sure will.” Koizumi agreed before she smacked his shoulder, “And really? We’ve known each other for more than a year. You can call me Mahiru.”

That… was surprising. Hajime looked up at her. Her cheeks were a bit pink. The moment their eyes met, she scowled and looked away, “I mean if you want. You don’t have to.”

“I do.” Hajime held back a laugh. “Thank you Mahiru… Saionji…”

“What? You’ll call my girlfriend by her first name and not me?” Saionji immediately pounced, “People will get the wrong idea.” She immediately stood up and wrapped her arms around Koizumi, “You can’t have my Mahiru.”

Koizumi laughed and Hajime gaped, shaking his head, “I… you know I got Nagito.”
“Mahiru’s better.” Saionji childishly pouted. “And I guess if we’re letting you call us by our first names, we can call you by yours, right?”

“You’re a bit biased.” Hajime countered before he smiled, nodding, “Right, Hiyoko… you can call me Hajime if you like.”

“Hajime… good.” She tested before swiftly changing the paper, “Okay! Let’s try another easy one!”

“Really?” Hajime sighed, “Can’t we finish tea?”

“Easy kanji. Now.” Saionji pointed, “Get to it Hajime!”

Jumping Hajime did as she ordered, brain scrambling to pick simple kanji to write. Setting to work, he began to move, envisioning his lines, making sure they were even. After he was done, Hajime smiled and held the paper up.

“Are you going to write all the days of the week or what?” Koizumi teased.

“Well, at least I have a theme…” Hajime defended himself.

“I suppose you’re right.” Koizumi held her camera up, “Smile!”

The light flashed before Hajime could move. Blinking, Hajime saw white spots dancing in his vision for a few seconds. “Ugh… warn me next time.”

“Sorry.” Koizumi dryly said.

“You better get used to it.” Saionji huffed, “Mahiru will be taking pictures at the party too.”

The party. Hajime registered her words. Soon they’d see Tsumiki and Tanaka again. He bit his lip. Would Saionji be all right? His brain supplied the memories of previous conversations, not that he could call them proper conversations. More like encounters.

“I’ll be fine.” Saionji groaned and suddenly Hajime felt something poke his side harshly.

“Sorry.” Hajime yelped. “It’s just… you haven’t been too comfortable with Tsumiki before. Will you be fine? Will you behave?”

Silence, followed by Saionji shuffling. Her cheeks were a deep red. Hands were balled in her kimono and her eyes downcast. Hajime could also feel Koizumi staring at him, but he stood his ground, maintaining his gaze on Saionji.

“I can’t claim to know how you feel about Tsumiki,” Hajime carefully said, “But try to keep a positive mind for the party, all right?”

For a moment, Hajime was sure Saionji would kick him out, maybe with some strong words, but she simply reached over and pinched his side, hard. Jumping, Hajime rubbed his side, feeling pain blossom.

“Ouch… that’s not a proper…”

“I will.” Saionji cut him off quickly, “I mean…” Her face was still pink, “I know I haven’t… it’s just difficult, but I’ll behave.” Her lips twisted at the word, “I promise.”

~

Everything ached, burned, oxygen was scarce as Hajime pushed himself, kept moving. He couldn’t see Kamukura, but something deep down urged him, told him Kamukura was in the direction he was going. The scenery blurred, twisted, muted, until it was a swirl of neutrals, spiralling outward, towards an unknown, unseen destination.

He had to find him. He had to find him.

The words urged him, pulsed deep in his veins, pushing him to continue. Hajime had to find him, had to see him, had to...

Had to what? Why was he doing this? The thought was so abrupt, so strong, Hajime almost stopped running. His pace slowed down, just a bit and the scenery around him started to take solid shape, forming like clay in a sculptor’s hand.

“Don’t you want to see him?”

A voice rang out, feminine, curious, light. It was also cold, smooth, eerie. It dripped off Hajime, like a glaze, warm, thin, sticky. It glossed over everything and made the world around him shiny, smooth like a reflection in the water.

“You aren’t going run?”

Hajime jolted. When did he stop running?

“You're stopping here?” The voice pressed.

No… he wanted to keep running…

“All right then…”

The floor under him started to crumble, cracking and creaking, large veins deeply cutting into the ground. Hajime’s balance was thrown off as he fell, the floor disappearing from under him.

~

The room was cold and his bed empty. Hajime rolled over and stared at the empty space beside him. It felt off to not have Komaeda there, clinging to him, sharing body heat. It would have been welcomed. Though at least he wasn’t waking Komaeda up. Sitting up and suppressing a shiver, Hajime turned his heater on, grabbed his sketchbook and pencil, and lay back down.

He had heard a voice, a female’s voice. Hajime flipped his book open. He had nothing to go on, no looks and the voice wasn’t familiar. Making a note in a corner, Hajime began to sketch lightly and quickly, before the dream slipped from his mind.

~

Sonia had set the party’s time for the evening, but Hajime didn’t feel right showing up without helping with preparations. So, along with Komaeda, they drove over to Hanamura’s house. The house was modest, with potted plants along the steps and a hand painted mailbox. Hajime’s hands felt empty, almost embarrassingly so, but Komaeda was holding his hand, squeezing it, anchoring Hajime’s embarrassment to a minimal level.

Ringing the bell, Hajime stepped back a bit. Across from Hanamura’s house a few kids were
playing, though they had abandoned their soccer ball in favour of staring at them, whispering and pointing a bit. Their scrutiny felt almost cute, curious, rather than judgemental. Hajime almost had the urge to smile and wave at the kids, but it was curbed by the door opening.

A short stout woman stood there. Her hair was pulled back into a bun, but Hajime could already see grey weaving in through her strands. A few lines stretched across her face, but her eyes brightly looked up at them. Her clothes were non-descript, but well made, pressed nicely, taken care of.

“Hello?” Her voice was pleasant, warm, like a slice of apple pie.

“Hello.” Komaeda smiled, “We’re friends of Hanamura and…”

Her eyes lit up and she stepped back, pulling the door open more, showing wrinkles that spoke of hard work and constantly moving mapped on her hands, “You’re here for the party, yes? Please, come in.”

Stepping inside, Hajime was hit with a wave of warm smells. He couldn’t pick anything specific out, but it made his mouth water and his stomach growl. On the inside, it was clear the house was more than modest, with nooks and crevices hiding many small trinkets: photos, keys, keychains, small paintings, embroidery. Hajime wanted to stare more, but nearly tripped over a pair of shoes. Flushing, he ripped his gaze down and began to reorganize, setting the shoes back properly, and stepping out of his shoes.

“I’m Komaeda Nagito. And this is Hinata Hajime.” Komaeda gestured.

“It’s lovely meeting you. You may call me Kana.”

“It’s nice to meet you Kana.” Komaeda said.

“Teruteru is in the kitchen.” She pointed down the hall, to a glass door at the end.

Hanamura was in the kitchen, bustling around, tending to the stove, pots and pans filled with various things. The oven light was on and the mix of smells was stronger. Hajime swallowed and walked inside. It was clear that the space in the house was for the kitchen. There were two fridges and a large counter that wrapped around, complete with a double sink. In the space by a large window, there was a round table, polished wood gleaming in the light. It was big enough to host them without much trouble.

“Oh, you came early.” Hanamura’s voice rang in the air, “How unexpected.”

“We wanted to help you with preparations.” Hajime answered.

“How sweet of you!” Hanamura’s mother burst behind them, “There are never enough hands when hosting a dinner party.”

“Mamma’s right.” Hanamura said with a smile on his face, “I’ll put you two to work. Why don’t we start with setting the table?”

Hajime rolled his sleeves up. After Hanamura showed where everything was, Hajime began to carry bowls, plates, chopsticks, and glasses over to the table. Some point during the setting, Komaeda was pulled over to the stove by Hanamura’s mother, helping her pull something out of the oven while Hanamura practically danced between two pots simmering and something frying in a pan. It was mesmerising to watch. There was a fluidity to Hanamura, a gracefulness that would never win any awards or medals, but one that spoke of practice through many years.
“This really is wonderful.”

Hajime almost slammed a glass down roughly. Hanamura’s mother was beside him, organizing some cloth napkins into simple shapes. Hajime let go of the glass and stepped back a bit, hoping she didn’t witness him almost breaking her glass.

“Teruteru hasn’t had friends over in… well I can’t remember the last time.” She continued, fondly smiling, carefully setting a napkin on a small plate, “I was so surprised when he announced we were having guests over.”

Her voice wavered, just a bit at the end, her eyes falling onto Hanamura with a muted warmth, a tenderness filled with love. Hajime swallowed and looked over. Komaeda was beside Hanamura, stirring as Hanamura pointed to things. His shoulders were a bit high, with his movement jilted, but he was talking to Komaeda. A smile broke on Hajime’s face slowly.

“We were surprised he requested we come over here.” Hajime replied, “But it’s nice. I like seeing your place. It’s nice.”

She chuckled, “It’s what we got. It’s sometimes too much for me, but Teruteru helps a lot. He’s the one who insisted on the kitchen, paid for it himself.”

That was amazing. Hajime blinked. He was still paying tuition and car bills, while Teruteru had paid for a renovated kitchen. “Wow…”

“I told him it wasn’t necessary, but when his heart is set on something, he does it.” Kana continued, “He’s always been like that.”

Setting down the last bowl, Hajime sat down beside her, watching her hands move, folding the napkin into something. “He has?”

“Oh yes!” Her voice brightened, “My husband died very early you see. Too early for Teruteru to remember him fully. I suppose this made him feel like he should do more, work hard around the house. Teruteru is my shining boy, ambitious. He wanted to open a bigger restaurant ever since he was a kid.”

“That’s… I am impressed.” Hajime couldn’t find the proper words to say, “You’ve always had a restaurant?”

“Yes, though it was just a small noodle house.” Kana replied, “Teruteru would help me on weekends and sometimes after school. Sometimes he wouldn’t do his homework and I’d get calls from teachers.”

Hajime closed his eyes. He could see it, a younger Hanamura helping, leaving homework undone to tend to customers. Opening his eyes, Hajime looked back at Hanamura, who was still bustling around the kitchen. There was a brightness, an almost burning heat that waffled off him. The passion was infectious and it was clear to Hajime Hanamura was more alive in a kitchen than sitting at a desk.

“Forgive me for rambling.” Kana laughed, standing up, “I’ll leave the cooking to your boys.” She walked over to Hanamura and patted his shoulder, “I’m going to clean the front a bit. Let me know if you need my help.”

“I will Mamma.” Hanamura replied.

She patted Komaeda’s arm too, nearly causing him jump, and walked out, shutting the door behind
her. Hajime walked over to the stove and glanced over Komaeda’s shoulder.

“How’s it going?” Hajime asked.

“It’s good.” Komaeda replied, easing into Hajime’s body, “Apparently, this is going to be the best curry we’ve ever eaten.”

“Damn right it will be!” Hanamura piped up, “It’s a family recipe, from my grandmother.”

“It smells great.” Hajime replied.

“Great? That’s a poor word to use!” Hanamura sighed, a bit dramatically, “The meat has to be prepared the night before in a blend of specific spices! The onions, we grew those. Same with the carrots and potatoes.” He pointed to the pot, “We’ve blended everything together perfectly. Your panties will drop when you taste this!”


“Not that you’re wearing panties.” Komaeda replied, “Unless there is something you’re not telling me?”

Hanamura began to laugh loudly and leaned a bit closer, “Oho? What’s this? Am I finally getting dirt on you Hinata?”

“I…” Hajime’s face was warm. He turned to Komaeda, who was looking at the curry, eyes dancing and mouth twitching. “You’re… you traitor… you’re enjoying this.”

“Just a bit?” Komaeda leapt when Hajime tried to elbow him, “Sorry love.”

Hajime gaped and looked back at Hanamura who was smiling, mirth dancing at the corners of his mouth. When he spotted Hajime’s gaze, he grinned wider and shook his head.

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t ask to see. Your panty wearing is secret between us Hinata.” He added sagely.

Komaeda’s laugh rang clearly and loudly even when Hajime darted in to elbow and half tackle him.

~

Everyone slowly trickled in as the time got closer. Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama were next, dressed nicely with a bottle of wine for Hanamura’s mother, who accepted it blinking at the door. Hajime eyed them. Kuzuryuu’s suit was not as elaborate as other ones, lacking a vest and tie, but the shirt under was still silk. Pekoyama was slightly better, lacking a suit jacket, but her shirt and pants were also tailored and expensive.

“You didn’t dress up?” Kuzuryuu scoffed at him, “You’re lazy Hajime.”

“Hey! I dressed nicely.” Hajime tugged his shirt. Sure, it wasn’t one Kuzuryuu bought him, but it was still a nice shirt, “Besides, I was helping.” He pointed to the table.

“…we should have brought an extra shirt along…” Pekoyama was muttering to Kuzuryuu.

“Or at least had his pants ironed…” Kuzuryuu added.

Hajime flushed, “Are you even listening to me?”
“Yes Hajime.” Pekoyama replied, “It’s kind of you to help out.” She gave a smile.

Grumbling Hajime walked back to the kitchen. Komaeda had moved on from checking the curry to helping Hanamuru arrange a fruit platter. Both looked up when they walked inside, Hanamuru giving a cheery wave and Komaeda a smile.

“Welcome to my home.” Hanamuru said, cutting an apple into a rabbit without looking.

“Thanks for having us.” Kuzuryuu glanced around.

Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama got comfortable, looking around the kitchen. A few moments later and Owari showed up with Souda, Saionji, and Koizumi. The latter two holding a bottle of sparkling juice.

“Your mother is a nice person.” Koizumi said as a means of explanation, “She asked us to bring these inside.”

Hanamuru hummed, “Set those inside the fridge please.”

“Are we the only ones here?” Owari asked.

“So far, yes.” Pekoyama replied.

“I hope it goes over well.” Komaeda finished arranging the plate.

Right. Hajime nodded and eyed Saionji carefully. Even though Tsumiki had met her before, this was the first time in a controlled setting. Who knew what she’d remember and hopefully that didn’t result in something going awry. As though in response to his thoughts, Saionji huffed a bit and Koizumi lay a hand on her shoulder.

“Whatever happens… we should try to have fun at least.” Koizumi carefully said, “I’ll be taking pictures of you all, so you better appreciate them.”

“A photoshoot huh?” Hanamuru sighed, “If I knew that I would have worn something… better.” His voice dipped a bit.

Koizumi shuddered and Saionji gave a dark glare in his direction. Souda coughed.

“So, uh… drinks?” He asked as he opened the fridge without permission. “We should save the sparkling stuff for dinner.”

“Right.” Pekoyama walked over and the two of them began to pour drinks.

Hajime accepted a glass of some sort of punch before walking over to Komaeda, handing him a glass too. Everyone else was migrating to the table, picking seats silently, sitting down. Hanamuru had moved on to poking at something in the oven, before going to the fridge and grabbing a plate filled with chopped vegetables.

“You two can sit down.” Hanamuru said, “Thank you for the help.”

“You’re welcome.” Komaeda shuffled out, “It was fun.”

They moved and were about to sit down when the door bell rang clearly through the house. Pekoyama was standing up in a flash, gaze darting towards the entrance. Souda was gripping his glass and Saionji was looking down into her glass. Hajime held his breath and carefully walked to the door, separating the kitchen from the hall. He could hear the door opening and voices. There was
a mix of soft and a loud, boisterous voice. Judging from the mix, it seemed everyone had arrived. Hajime stepped back just in time to the door opening, nearly swinging in his face. He gave a smile as Mitarai, Tsumiki, Sonia, and Tanaka walked into the kitchen.

It was time.

“Hello everyone.” Sonia greeted, her cheeks still flushed from the weather, “I hope we’re not too late?”

“No, it’s fine.” Hanamura chimed, “The main dishes are almost ready… please take a seat.”

Mitarai walked in, Tsumiki following them like a shadow. Thankfully there were two seats unoccupied. Both sat down, Tsumiki curling into herself, hands clutched in front of her chest. Across from her, Owari waved and smiled.

“Hello Mitarai, Tsumiki!” She said, “How are you?”

“I’m good.” Mitarai replied, “Finding this place was a bit of a challenge though. GPS kept telling us we were walking in the wrong direction. Plus, the weather is awful. It’s snowing hard.”

“GPS can do that sometimes.” Owari nodded, “Reminds me of one time when it told me to cut through a building just to save time.”

“W-we w-walked f-for a b-block before w-we r-realized w-we w-were g-going in the w-wrong direction.” Tsumiki softly told.

“Wow…” Hajime sat beside Owari, “I’m glad you found your way. We’ve been looking forward to this party.”

“M-me too…” Tsumiki smiled gently.

“It’s been a while since you’ve seen everyone here.” Komaeda gestured, “Do you need introductions?”

“All good stage plays begin with introductions!” Tanaka inserted himself in, sitting with a graceful flop beside Tsumiki, “Now, let us draw back the curtain to this spectacle!”

Sonia sat beside him, a smile filling her face, a softness in her eyes. Reaching for his hand, she gently placed hers on his, “That sounds like a fantastic idea Gundham.” She looked at Tsumiki, “I’m Sonia.”

A bit of pink filled Tanaka’s cheeks, but he didn’t move or try to take Sonia’s hand off his own.

“And I am known as Tanaka the Forbidden One!” Tanaka proclaimed. “And…” he suddenly added with a flourish, “These are my Four Dark Devas of Destruction!”

Suddenly four hamsters, varying in size, shape, and colour, appeared out of his jacket sleeves. Souda let out a startled gasp, eyes widening. Saionji gaped and inched a bit away, and Pekoyama shifted ever so slightly over. Sonia immediately picked one up, gently stroking it’s back.

“Are those…?” Owari leaned closer.

“Wow he does carry hamsters…” Komaeda hummed beside Hajime.

“You weren’t kidding…” Souda’s voice was a mix, his eyes wide, hand half stretched out to touch one.
“Aren’t they cute?” Sonia chirped.

“Y-yes?” Tsumiki’s eyes widened, “N-Nice t-to s-see you a-again… I’m T-Tsumiki M-Mikan.”

“My inner eye remembers your form clearly!” Tanaka said with bright eyes, “Tell me, how did you form the bonds to join this group on the road of life?”

“I… m-my r-roommate…” Tsumiki pointed to Mitarai.

“Through the bonds of another… I see!” Tanaka turned to Mitarai, “Inform me, who are you? Your form keeps changing. My inner mind cannot pin a corporeal manifestation onto you. You straddle the line of reality and dream.”

Mitarai blinked, “I’m Mitarai Ryouta. Nice to meet you Tanaka-san… and your… Four Dark Devas of Destruction.”

“Formalities!” Tanaka leaned over, eyes bright at them mentioning his hamsters too, “I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Mitarai of the corporeal forms!”

Across from him, at the other end of the table, Hajime saw Saionji roll her eyes and turn away, her cheeks pink and gaze darting towards them. Koizumi was rubbing her arm before she stood up, camera in hand. Walking around the table, she started to take pictures of the food before she moved over to the table.

“Smile everyone.” She commanded, giving a few seconds pause before she took a picture.

“Let’s have one with everyone together!” Owari cheered, followed by Souda

“Oh, okay.” Koizumi nodded. “Come over to this side.”

Everyone shuffled over, Koizumi, ordering them around, telling who to sit, who to stand. Hajime found himself standing, situated between Pekoyama and Komaeda. Tanaka was somehow shifting his hamsters over, some of them curling into his scarf, as he remained seated. Pekoyama looked like she was about to lean over to touch one. Hanamura also joined, trying to nudge close to Sonia. Koizumi scowled and told him to move over, closer to Kuzuryuu. Hajime stifled a laugh at the look exchanged.

“Okay…” Koizumi muttered, lifting her camera, “Everyone smile…” The camera clicked a couple of times. “Perfect!”

“Do you want to be in the picture too?” Mitarai asked, “I could take the picture.”

“Or I could go get Mamma.” Hanamura immediately jumped to action.

Koizumi flushed, pink dusting her freckles, “I don’t usually… but okay…”

“Great.” Hanamura said, “I’d like a memento of our… time together.”

“Eww…” Saionji hissed, “That’s my Mahiru…”

Her words were cut off as the room suddenly was enveloped in pitch blackness.

For a moment, the room stood still, silent. Then, panic spread. Someone whimpered. Tsumiki? Hajime scrambled. He couldn’t see his hand in front of his face. His heart was palpitating against his ribs, threatening to swallow him whole in the rhythm. His pulse was going to burst. This was like the dreams… where Mitarai was found… Hajime blanched and tried to grab someone, anyone. Hands
groped and Hajime found someone to hold onto briefly.

“W-What matter of hellish demonic…” Tanaka’s voice rose.

“H-Hey… what happened?” Saionji’s voice wavered.

“T-The power?” Souda asked, “Here… if I could see… I could…”

“I got this.” Pekoyama’s voice smoothly filled the room.

Suddenly there was a light, white and blue from a cellphone. Pekoyama held up her phone, the flashlight on. It bathed the area in light and Hajime felt his heart rate slow down. No, it was fine. This wasn’t the old building. It was Hanamura’s house.

“Ow…”

Hajime jumped. His hand was still on someone else’s. Looking down he saw his hand laced in with Saionji’s. She was kneeling, biting her lip. Flailing, Hajime knelt beside her, unlacing their hands, touching her shoulder lightly.

“Hiyoko? Are you okay?” Hajime asked.

“I’m f-fine…” She swallowed, rubbing her hand a bit. “Did you have to hold my hand so tightly?”

“Sorry…” Hajime patted her shoulder, “I didn’t mean to.”

Saionji opened her mouth, but was cut off by a gasp, followed by a slight wail. Whipping his head around, Hajime saw Tsumiki, sprawled on the floor, a chair clattered on the side around her. It took Hajime all of two seconds to process what had happened. Tsumiki rubbed her head as Hajime half scrambled over to her, pulling his phone out, turning his flashlight on.

“Tsumiki?” Hajime reached over to touch her shoulder, but she batted his hand away. Hajime stopped and gapped.

Tsumiki turned around. Hajime forced himself to breathe. Her eyes were swirling a bit again, ever so slightly. Something around her was cold, steady, the way an icy stream was, threatening to pull him under. Hajime shuffled away, his heart in his throat, compressing, squeezing air out…

“You’re…” She cocked her head.

“Hey what’s wrong?” Koizumi and Owari showed up, kneeling beside Hajime.

“Oh… are you all right?” Owari asked, “Looks like you took a tumble…”

Tsumiki’s eyes focused on Koizumi, widening a bit, “But… your head was crushed in…” She whispered before a jagged, seam ripping smile filled her face, “Am I dreaming?”

“My…” Koizumi immediately stood up, stepping back, “My head… do you… remember?”

Her voice was soft, but Hajime was sure everyone heard them. The room felt froze, like a time capsule launched into a freezer, forever buried in a singular moment. Everything was crystalizing, like amber, slowly, smoothly, wrapping everything in sap…

“She what?” Saionji’s voice slowly moved through the silence, languid.

Tsumiki’s gaze focused on Saionji so quickly Hajime felt his head spin. Saionji stared back, eyes
wide, hands curling into her kimono. Tsumiki didn’t blink and with a movement almost too smooth, too perfect, she began to move a bit closer, hand reaching out.

“You…” Saionji shakily took a step back, “Stay…”

A hum filled the room and suddenly the lights were back on, blinding everyone. Hajime closed his eyes automatically at the sudden light, but he forced himself to look. Tsumiki stopped, her trance broken for a second, before she scrambled up, face flushed, eyes wide. She stared at Saionji still, but her eyes weren’t swirling. Hajime breathed so deeply the rush of oxygen made him dizzy.

“I…” Tsumiki looked at Saionji, “You’re… still…” She touched her neck and blanched, hands suddenly curling around her stomach. “B-Bath…”

She didn’t have to finish her sentence. Pekoyama swooped in, touching her shoulders and practically sprinting her out of the kitchen. Hanamura waddled after them, directions spewing from his lips.

With Tsumiki gone, the room reanimated. Sonia was shaking and Tanaka moved her to a seat, voice low, talking to her. Komaeda immediately rushed over, wrapping his arm around his waist. Hajime leaned into the touch, the warmth, and shakily stood up. Owari was still staring at the spot where Tsumiki was. Hajime reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her up with him.

“What was… that…” Kuzuryuu’s voice was low.

Was there an answer? Hajime looked at the door. Tsumiki had mentioned Koizumi’s head and her reaction to Saionji… did it mean Tsumiki remembered something? Hajime whipped his gaze over to her. She was wrapped in Koizumi’s arms, the two whispering to each other.

“It seems.” Tanaka’s voice was low, even, “That a dark miasma has fallen upon our hearts and minds. It’s consuming the room.”

A dark miasma… that was appropriate. Hajime stared at where Tsumiki and Pekoyama had left. Something had happened, some sort of reaction. Without much thought, Hajime moved towards the door, opening it, nearly running into Hanamura’s mother.

“Are you kids all right in here?” She asked, a flashlight still in her hands.

Everything washed away from Hajime and he focused, nodding his head numbly, before pushing past her.

“Yes, we’re fine. Thank you.” Hajime gave a smile, “If you’ll excuse me…”

He raced down the hall, hearing her voice echo behind him.

“Oh good… it appears this power outage was short.” She gave a small laugh, “I’m glad it didn’t ruin your party.”

With the way things were going, the party was already ruined without the power remaining off. Hajime shook the thought away and headed down the hall. Hanamura never really told him where the bathroom, was, but the silence was a gift. He could hear voices, trickling out and light spilling into the hallway. Walking forward, Hajime opened the door without a thought.

Pekoyama glanced up, but Tsumiki sat on the toilet seat, curled up, taking deep breathes. In her hand was a glass of water. As Hajime stepped inside, Tsumiki looked up at him. Her eyes widened and she uncurled herself, wobbling, and stood up.
“Hinata?” She asked carefully, “I-I…”

“Do you remember what you said to Koizumi in the kitchen?” Hajime blurt out, “Do you remember…” He couldn’t finish the sentence. Did she remember seeing Koizumi with her head bashed in?

Tsumiki swallowed, “Her… h-head…” She paled and sat back down, “I-I s-see… her h-head…”

The door creaked a bit more, breaking her sentence. Mitarai stepped inside and Tsumiki clutched her glass of water tighter. Pekoyama carefully moved, so she was closer to the door, letting Mitarai come inside, making the space a bit less crowded.

“Mikan! Are you all right?” Mitarai bustled over.

“I… I t-think s-so… b-but…”

“Tsumiki said she could see Koizumi with her head bashed in.” Pekoyama factually stated.

Mitarai gaped, their jaw dropping a bit, “Is that… do you remember Mikan?”

“R-Remember?” Tsumiki squeaked, “Y-you m-mean y-you’ve s-seen it?”

Hajime exhaled sharply. This meant she saw what he thought she saw. Pulling his phone out, he opened his gallery and quickly scrolled, wincing when he saw the picture. No matter how many times Hajime saw, he didn’t like seeing Koizumi dead.

“Yes. We have.” Hajime carefully said.

Tsumiki stared, shallowly breathing, shakily wheezing lightly.

“I… I… don’t know… what…”

“We’re sorry.” Mitarai immediately said, “We can explain.”

“It will have to be later.” Pekoyama calmly said, “We can give you privacy to recover, but we should get back to the party.”

“O-Okay…” Tsumiki grabbed Mitarai’s hand.

Hajime knew a dismissal when he saw one. Nodding, he walked out with Pekoyama, shutting the door partially, and returned to the kitchen. Everything was swirling in his brain. Tsumiki… potentially remembered something. It was small… but it was enough… they could explain later. Hopefully, the wouldn’t sound too bizarre.

Everyone was at the table, eating and chatting. Almost every pair of eyes launched onto them, but immediately returned to their talking. Hajime waded through the sea of gazes, and sat down. Immediately Komaeda curled closer to him. Hajime savoured the heat and the proximity. Reaching for his bowl, Hajime began to fill it with food. Everything smelt wonderful and was still steaming. When everyone had something, they quickly thanked Hanamura for the meal.

 “…I suppose I could allow you to take pictures of my Four Dark Devas of Destruction…”

“Thanks Tanaka.” Koizumi chirped. “I’ll do my best!”

“Koizumi takes wonderful pictures!” Sonia chimed in, “She’ll do justice to your Four Dark Devas of Destruction!”
The four hamsters squeaked and Hanamura shrieked.

“B-Be careful with those!” Hanamura scolded.

“Those? These are my loyal minions, my companions.” Tanaka glared.

“Now, now…” Sonia reached for his arm.

Hajime snorted and continued to eat, savouring every bite. Komaeda took the moment to lean over to him.

“How is Tsumiki?” Komaeda asked softly.

“She’s all right…” Hajime carefully whispered back, “But…” He eyed the table, “We can talk later.”

“Okay.” Komaeda agreed.

Despite what had happened, once Hajime began to eat, he felt a warmth fill him as flavours burst on his tongue. A small smile etched across his face and he continued to eat.

“Oh wow, this is amazing!” Hajime gasped.


“Dessert!?” Owari swallowed a large chunk of meat alarmingly fast, “What is it?”

“It is a surprise.” Hanamura replied, “But, you know, I could always give you a… flash…”

Owari cheerfully threw a grape at him.

~

Mitarai and Tsumiki returned as Hajime was finishing up. Tsumiki opened her mouth and began to stammer out apologies, face still red.

“It’s fine.” Kuzuryuu cut her off kindly.

“Distressed girls are still cute you know.” Hanamura added.

Kuzuryuu shot a look. Hanamura wilted.

“I-I… I s-should a-apologize…” Tsumiki continued.

“Oh, it is quite all right.” Hanamura rounded on her, “In fact, if you still feel ill you can always stay the night here…”

“Mikan is fine.” Mitarai cut him off and turned to Tsumiki, “Let’s sit and eat?”

Shyly nodding, Tsumiki sat down. Hajime let out a sigh. Explanations could wait. Right now, he had more than enough excitement for one evening.

~


‘Wait, does Tsumiki remember something?’ – Kazuichi
‘Oh, seriously? That’s good!’ – Owari

‘Are you sure? Having everyone around her could be stressful.’ – Mitarai

‘I agree. It should just be a few of us.’ – Fuyuhiko

‘I won’t come if you feel there shouldn’t be a lot of us there.’ – Nagito

‘Good. Because I don’t think Hiyoko should… be present.’ – Mahiru

‘I’d like to be there, if that’s all right.’ – Sonia

‘Me too.’ – Hajime

‘Sorry, I’m still cleaning up from last night.’ – Hanamura

~

The events from Hanamura’s party stuck in Hajime’s mind, like pictures cobbled together with a hot glue gun. Idly he played with his tea cup. The room was bright, almost a yellow glow, as sunlight filtered in. A heater sat in the corner, humming and blowing hot air in Hajime’s face. A part of his brain told him that this was a bad idea. This was essentially cornering Tsumiki. If they were wrong and she didn’t remember they would look strange. Fumbling along the floor, Hajime’s hands grasped for his sketchbook, tightly curling around the edge of the book.

Mitarai walked in, Tsumiki in tow. As soon as she saw the room, Tsumiki curled into Mitarai, eyes darting around the room. Hajime looked at Kuzuryuu. The conversation from before played in his mind, the screen dancing. Even with only four of them, Tsumiki was still wilting in their presence.

“Hello Tsumiki.” Hajime took the lead, smiling as warmly, “You can Mitarai can sit by me.”

“Sure.” Mitarai shut the door behind them and walked over, sitting down with Tsumiki, “Thanks Hinata.”

“Would you like some tea?” Pekoyama asked as she poured two cups.

“Yes please.” Mitarai accepted it.

“T-Thank you…” Tsumiki shyly muttered.

“We’re sorry we asked you here like this.” Pekoyama started, “We just wanted to make sure you’re… all right from last night.”

Tsumiki flinched and looked at her tea cup, “I’m… f-fine.”

“Could you tell us what happened?” Sonia gently asked.

“I…” Tsumiki swallowed audibly, “I… a-after the power w-went off… I f-fell trying to f-find my w-w-way… s-suddenly I-I saw Koizumi…”

“Her head was bashed in, right?” Mitarai softly finished her sentence.

“Y-Yes…”

Kuzuryuu sighed, “We… we don’t have a good way to put this… but we all remember. Seeing Koizumi like that.”
“Y-you d-do?” Tsumiki stared, “E-even y-you M-Mitarai?”

“I…” Mitarai fumbled, “Not that part.”

“P-Part?” Tsumiki asked.

“It’s a long story.” Hajime told her, “But if you’ll let us explain?”

Tsumiki nodded, folding her hands in her lap. “O-Okay.”

“Ever since high school I’ve had these dreams.” Hajime started, “I saw dreams of Kazuichi before I met him. Same with Fuyuhiko and Peko.”

“We all had the same dreams.” Pekoyama told her, “Of… an island and death. When Fuyuhiko and I met Hajime and Kazuichi… we knew the dreams were connecting us.”

“S-So… y-you f-found m-me because o-of these d-dreams?” Tsumiki asked.

“We didn’t find you intentionally.” Kuzuryuu told her, “It was accidental on Hajime and Komaeda’s part.”

“I-I… s-see… so e-everyone l-last night…”

“Besides you and Tanaka, everyone remembers, as far as we know.” Sonia told her.

“Are you w-wondering if I r-remember anything t-too?” Tsumiki inquired.

“… just a bit.” Hajime told her, “Every time we run into someone in our dreams… they end up remembering. We want to figure out what the dreams are really about.”

“T-That’s why y-you’re drawing them?”

“That’s why.” Hajime nodded.

Tsumiki looked down pensively, “Do y-you think I’ll r-remember now t-too?”

“We… think so.” Mitarai simply said, “We want you to know that… we do too.”

“O-Okay…” Tsumiki nodded.

“Hajime has his sketches here.” Sonia pointed, “If you want to see them?”

“I… if it’s o-okay?”

Time to abridge everything. Hajime opened his book, to the time line. He best skim Trial three… carefully. Who knew how Tsumiki would react to it? Taking a deep breath, Hajime began to speak. His tea was cold by the time he was done.

~

Komaeda was in his house, sitting on the couch, when Hajime returned. Heat poured out and Hajime gratefully shrugged his coat off and walked over to him. Without grace Hajime flopped into Komaeda’s lap, arching into the fingers that wove into his hair.

“How did it go?” Komaeda asked.
“She… didn’t freak out.” Hajime muttered, “I think having Mitarai there was helpful.”

“I’m glad.” Komaeda moved his hand down, tugging a bit at the hair near Hajime’s neck, “I suppose now we only have Tanaka to wonder about.”

“I wish I could have talked to him more.” Hajime rubbed his head against Komaeda’s hand, “But I suppose next time…”

“A smaller group would be easier.” Komaeda suggested.

“Later.” Hajime sat up a bit, snuggling into Komaeda’s frame, “This party ended up a bit more stressful than I had imagined.”

“Oh?” Komaeda’s hands left his hair and settled around his hips, “Are you stressed?” His tone dipped.

Hajime flushed. Komaeda leaned a bit closer.

“Want help with that?” Komaeda asked serenely.

Hajime wanted to answer, but Komaeda had already sealed the distance, kissing him with a bit of roughness, a bit too quick. Hajime leaned into it all together and soon they were flat on the couch. Breaking their kiss, Komaeda laughed breathily, cheeks a bit pink.

“I’m taking that as a yes.” He cheekily grinned.

Rolling his eyes, Hajime simply leaned back, and pulled Komaeda into another kiss.

~

Hajime woke to Komaeda snuggled against him, breathing softly. The air around them was cold, but their bed was warm. Smiling, Hajime pulled back a bit of hair from Komaeda’s mouth. Seeing Komaeda asleep, in his flannel pajamas filled Hajime’s heart, making it light and bouncy. At his desk, Hajime’s phone was blinking a green light. Wiggling, Hajime grabbed his phone quickly, scowling at the coldness, and checked.

’Soo, Tsumiki remembers?’ – Koizumi

’Sort of… she hasn’t said anything else about the party to me.’ – Mitarai

‘As much as I was glad to have a party… this feels like we learnt little about Tanaka and Tsumiki’s memories.’ – Peko

‘We had fun… I think that’s what counts?’ – Owari

“You’re right. I’m sorry for being depressing.’ – Peko

The conversation continued. Hajime shut his phone and tucked it under his pillow. He’d read it all later. Curling back closer to Komaeda, Hajime savoured the moment, the silence, with the person he loved in his arms.

Love… Hajime felt his mouth curl up at the thought. It was love. He was in love with Komaeda. The realization hit him gently, like the lapping of waves at his feet, or a breeze tickling his hair. Suddenly his world shifted, ever so slightly, widening. Suddenly Hajime couldn’t remember exactly how his world looked like without the change. It fit in his heart like the wrapping on chocolate, sealing a sweetness with a shiny layer.
“You’re grinning.” Komaeda sleepily commented, “Did you have a good dream?”

Hajime felt a burst in his heart, a flower slowly opening. Leaning closer, Hajime pressed a sweet kiss to Komaeda’s lips, light, tender. “I love you Nagito.”

Komaeda hummed, “You’re sappy this morning.”

“Oh, be quiet.” Hajime lightly scolded.

“Sorry, just teasing. I love you too Hajime.” Komaeda laughed, pressing another light kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Nichi: one way to read the kanji for "day" and "sun". Also, it's used in "Sunday", hence Koizumi making the joke of him writing the days of the week.

Line count: So, kanji difficulty can be sorted by line count (how many lines make up the character).

Writing: There is a specific order used in writing kanji (really reinforced in calligraphy). Basically, the lines go up and down, left to right.

Hanamura's mother: I just picked a random name. Also, I just randomly made up the part about Teruteru's father. It's not supported by canon at all, just me making stuff up.

Shining boy: Teruturu can mean "shining".

Kitchen size: Most Japanese houses are small, so having a large room would cost quite a bit.

Roommate: I’m not entirely sure how Japan feels about boys/girls sharing a place (without being related or in a relationship etc), but I love the idea of Mitarai and Tsumiki being roommates.
Splinters

Chapter Notes

Hi! Sorry it's been a while. I had a hard time starting this chapter, but when I had the
time to sit down and write I did surprisingly well. I do feel bad though... I've been mean
to so many characters lately... though at least this time I'm not being mean to Mikan! (I
realized later that my recent chapters for my SDR2 fics have been quite mean to Mikan.
SORRY MIKAN!)

I'm very excited for this chapter. I got scenes in here I've had planned and written or
partially written for a while. It feels great to get them out and finally let them be used.

As always thank you for your comments and kudos. It means a ton to me. Feel free to
leave one if you like. They never cease to make my day! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pekoyama passed a glass of water to Hajime. Eagerly taking it, Hajime gulped down the contents
and collapsed on the floor. Sweat stuck in all sorts of places and left his clothes awkwardly clinging
to his body. His body ached, but everything felt light. Beside him, Souda was lying down, pressing
his face against his glass of water. Kuzuryuu sat beside Souda, idly drinking his water.

“Good work today.” Pekoyama sat beside them, “You’re doing great.”

“How are you two not dying?” Souda wheezed on the floor, “That was brutal. You don’t hold back
Fuyuhiko.”

“It’s not training if I pull all of my punches.” Kuzuryuu replied, “Besides, I thought you wanted me
to join you?”

“We’ve been training since we were young.” Pekoyama answered Souda’s question.

“Yeah, and I always got my ass handed to me.” Kuzuryuu laughed, “First in self defense, then in
kendo.”

“I…” Pekoyama cleared her throat, “I just try my best…”

“You're a natural.” Kuzuryuu said with a smile, “You’ve always picked up fighting well.”

“Not surprised.” Hajime replied.

Pekoyama cleared her throat, “Anyways... if we’re done... I got a question for you two.”

“Okay?” Souda sat up, “What’s up?”

“I’ve been invited to perform some kendo this April at a traditional Japanese Arts fair.” Pekoyama
said, “I was hoping you two would like to join.”

Hajime cracked a smile, “As if you need to ask us Peko. We’d love to go.”
“Yeah, of course, we’re going.” Souda firmly nodded.

“Good, because you’re going to need to dress up.” Kuzuryuu idly added.

“… we should have known…” Souda deflated a bit, “But it’s worth it to watch Peko!” He added with a bright smile once again filling his face.

“Thank you Kazuichi.” Pekoyama gave a small smile. “That means a lot to me.”

“Just don’t tell us we need to do more suit shopping.” Hajime added.

Kuzuryuu looked over at Souda, “I don’t know, we might need to…”

Souda groaned and Kuzuryuu started laughing.

~

Why was everywhere crowded? Hajime pushed past an elderly couple, an apology on his lips as he pushed his cart towards the produce section. In a way, it was his fault. The sale the grocery store was advertising had bound to attract people. Unfortunate for Hajime. Perhaps he should have picked a different store, but he’d be lying if he wasn’t one of the people attracted by the sale.

Glancing over, Hajime saw a sign reading about apples on sale. Soon apples would be out of season and local ones were always the best… Hajime walked over and was about to pick up a bag of apples when he bumped into someone.

“Ah, I’m sorry…” Hajime stared.

“I-I’m s-sorry too!” Tsumiki stammered before she looked up, “H-Hinata?”

“Tsumiki.” Hajime smiled, “Fancy running into you at a grocery store again.”

“Y-Yeah…” She smiled weakly, “M-Mitarai is h-here too.”

“They are?” Hajime reached for the bag of apples.

“Y-Yes. M-Mitarai just w-went for some t-tofu.”

“And just returned.” Mitarai suddenly walked up, “Hello Hinata.”

“Hey,” Hajime said, “I suppose you came here because of the sale.”

“That and we desperately need groceries.” Mitarai laughed, “Mikan has been working some late nights and I’m terrible at cooking. Without her I would probably order take out all the time.”

“I-It’s n-not healthy.” Tsumiki firmly said, “Y-you need to be c-careful!”

Their face flushed a bit, but a fond smile filled their face. Setting the tofu into the basket, Mitarai looked over at the apples. “Thanks for looking out for me Mikan.” They smiled, “Apples?”

“S-sure.” Tsumiki nodded.

“I’ll leave you to your shopping.” Hajime edged away. “See you later.”

“Good bye Hinata.” Mitarai waved.

“B-bye.” Tsumiki said.
Hajime stared. A new art project, and more work to do. The theme, self portrait, was loose, basically letting Hajime do whatever he wanted. It was both liberating and stressful. He couldn’t do just anything or something simple. Tapping his pencil against the paper, Hajime tried to think. What elements made him? It wasn’t easy to answer, and with the dreams floating in his mind, it made the task complicated. Groaning, Hajime stuffed his paper into his bag. It was yet another thing he’d have to sort out later.

The diner Owari worked at was surrounded by layers of snow. Hajime dragged himself around, trying to dodge the taller piles and stay on a cleared path. Still, despite his best effort, Hajime could feel snow in his boots, melting against his socks. An uncomfortable squish filled his boot, as his socks started to absorb the water. Grimacing, Hajime hurried to the entrance of the diner, gratefully slipping inside. At once the heat hit his body. Hajime happily walked inside, locating a small table to the side, and sat down.

Pulling the menu out, Hajime scanned it. There were some new items he hadn’t seen before, and some specials he wanted to try. Hitting the server button, Hajime waited. A moment later and Owari bustled over, her face lighting up as she spotted him.

“Hey Hajiji!” She plopped down across from him, “What can I get for you?”

“Hi Owari.” Hajime smiled, “I think I’ll go for your sandwich special.”

“Good choice!” She pulled her pen and paper out, “What do you want to drink with that?”

“Coffee.” Hajime answered, “How’s work going?”

“It’s slow, but that’s fine.” Owari smiled, “It means I can feel less guilty about taking my break now and hanging out with you. Unless you were expecting company?”

“Uh, no, just me.” Hajime shook his head, “Feel free to join me Owari.”

“Owari?” She raised an eyebrow, “You know, I was talking to Hiyoko and Mahiru. They told me you’re now using their first names. We’ve known each other for just as long Haji. You can call me Akane.”

Hajime flushed. “Oh… okay… I’m sorry I just fell into the habit.”

“It’s fine.” Owari laughed.

“Oh, thanks… Akane.” Hajime tested her name out.

“I’ll get your order and then we can chat.” Owari bounded away.

When she returned Owari wasn’t just carrying Hajime’s order, but also another tray with a sandwich and fries. Plopping down across from him, she pushed his order over and began to eat her fries.

“Thanks, Akane.” Hajime bit into his sandwich.

“No, thank you Hajime.” She said, “I was getting hungry and with you here I got the push I needed to go on break.” Owari bit into her sandwich, “How’s school?”

“Busy,” Hajime answered, “Got many projects on the go, but it’s done for today. I need a break.”
“Me too,” Owari sighed, “One of our guys quit, so I’ve been picking up some shifts while we try to hire a new person. It’s messing up my gym schedule.”

“Gym?”

“Yeah, I started to go to one.” Owari replied, “I’ve been a bit out of shape since I don’t like running outside during winter. They got so many classes and activities too.”

“Sounds like fun.” Hajime took another bite of his sandwich.

“It’s also very affordable.” Owari continued, “So, if you want to try it out some time.”

A gym huh? Hajime didn’t really keep up with physical fitness, except the walking he did around the campus and self defense with Pekoyama. Perhaps, if he went to a gym it would help him not feel winded after every session.

“Maybe I’ll give it a shot some time.” Hajime agreed, “Give me the name of the place and I’ll check it out.”

“All right!” Owari cheered, “Will do!”

~

A breeze picked up on the island. Hajime welcomed the cooling feel and continued his journey to the hospital. A bottle of water was in his hands, condensation dripping off as he walked through the heat. The day had barely started and already the heat was slapping him in the face, humid and sticky. Lifting the water bottle, Hajime took a long sip, enjoying the coolness. It wouldn’t stay cold for long. He’d have to hurry. If only the hospital wasn’t so far away. Sighing Hajime picked his pace up. Sleep tried to grab him with it’s spiralling fingers, but he couldn’t sleep. He had work to do and if he rested, something would most likely go wrong. Again.

~

Hajime woke to a dry throat and an aching head. Sitting up he shivered and fumbled for his light. Pulling the string, he groaned when the blinding light hit his eyes. Reaching for his sketchbook, Hajime turned his heater on and flopped back under his covers. The dream felt different, a strange mix of calm and stress. Hajime tapped his pencil against his pillow as he turned to his side. He had dreamed of the island before, but somehow this felt different, almost calmer. Why, Hajime wasn’t sure. All he could do, was sketch it out.

~

“A double date?” Hajime repeated.

“Yes! If you want…” Sonia added quickly, “I won four free tickets at the raffle and I don’t want them wasted.”

“What do you think?” Hajime turned to Komaeda.

Komaeda curled his arm around Hajime’s shoulder and leaned over to examine the ticket on the table, “An amusement park?”

“I’ve never been to one here in Japan!” Sonia nodded her head, “But I read up on this one and it looks like fun.”
“When are you thinking of going?” Hajime asked.

“Well this ticket is good for the rest of the month, so whenever you’re free?” Sonia asked, “Though a weekend would be the best.”

“I’m free this weekend.” Komaeda offered. “You?”

“I think I am too.” Hajime answered.

“Excellent!” Sonia smiled, “I’ll tell Gundham and get back to you two. Thank you so much. Let’s have fun together.”

~

Being woken up by his phone wasn’t anything new to Hajime. Hearing crying on the other end wasn’t anything new either (as much as it pained him to admit). But waking up to Saionji hiccupping and wheezing in between her crying almost made Hajime drop his phone. His heart sank deeply and it hurt to breathe. A tingle ran down his spine, pushing the sensation of falling through his body.

“H-Hiyoko?” Hajime’s voice pitched low.

“H-Hajime… P-please h-help.” Saionji gasped between her words, “M-Mahiru…”

“Deep breathes.” Hajime tried to sound soothing Instead he felt like a rock was being pushed in his stomach, “Are you at home?” At this point, Hajime opted for yes or no questions.

“Y-yes…”

“Do you want me to come over?”

“Y-Yes…” Saionji almost wailed, “P-Please hurry…”

“Ok. I will.” Hajime set his phone to speaker as he started to throw on proper clothes. The chill of his house bit into his skin, but he didn’t have time to turn his heater on. “I’ll need to hang up soon so I can drive, but I’m going to tell everyone. Someone will phone you, okay?”

Saionji’s response was a hiccup and sob mixed with a yes before the call cut. Hajime pulled a sweater over his shirt and grabbed a pair of socks. As he fumbled, Hajime hit his speed dial, setting the phone to speaker once again. The sound of rings in the air drilled a hole into Hajime’s stomach. What if he couldn’t get anyone else? What if no one answered? Saionji was expecting someone to phone her back…


“Fuyuhiko.” Hajime tried to not yell, “I need you to phone Hiyoko. Now.”

“Hajime?” He could hear Kuzuryuu sit up and shake the sleep from his voice, “Something is wrong.”

“Yes. I don’t know what though.” Hajime admitted as he bolted out of his room, “But please…”

“You’re going to her place.” Kuzuryuu stated.

“Yes, I am.” Hajime grabbed his coat and tried to put it on while balancing his phone.

“Okay. I’ll phone her.” Kuzuryuu calmly said, “Get going.”
“Right.” Hajime hung up.

Running out of his place, Hajime locked the door quickly and went to his car. Turning it on, Hajime went to his phone’s GPS, almost throwing it out the window as it loaded slowly. When the route was in place, Hajime began to drive.

The silence filled his car and slowly stabbed Hajime. He wanted to speed up, to go faster, but the snow prevented him. Desperately Hajime tried to shut his thoughts off, focus on driving, but his heart was pounding hotly under his skin. This was like Owari, the desperate call, the fear clawing at his throat. Hajime exhaled. No, this was different. Koizumi had Saionji with her. Whatever was wrong hopefully it would be all right. Sucking in a deep breath, Hajime kept driving. He was close.

As he turned the corner to Saionji’s place, he spotted a familiar limo parked outside. Hajime felt his heart lighten, a breathy laugh escaping his lips. Of course, Kuzuryuu wouldn’t sit still at his place. Parking crooked, Hajime turned his car off and ran to the front door, without locking his car.

The door opened, Pekoyama poking her head out. Hajime stepped back to let her open the door, before he rushed in, letting her close the door. Warmth poured in and Hajime silently savoured it as he started to unzip his jacket.

“What happened?” Hajime gasped out instead of a greeting. “What’s wrong?”

“Saionji woke to Koizumi crying.” Pekoyama immediately replied, “She went down to the kitchen to get some water, but before Saionji could give her the glass she turned around and saw Koizumi pulling a knife out.”

“A what?” Hajime blurted out as he kicked his boots off.

“She had her hand on the counter, a knife hovering over her fingers.” Pekoyama continued, “When Saionji tried to stop her, she got violent, telling Saionji she didn’t need her fingers, that she didn’t want to hold a camera anymore.”

Hajime felt his stomach twist and burn. He didn’t want to imagine it, but he could see Koizumi, holding the knife. He gagged, “She didn’t do anything… did she?” His voice started to grow softer.

“Thankfully no.” Pekoyama answered, “Saionji managed to wrestle the knife away and restrain Koizumi before phoning you.”

The twisting in Hajime’s stomach loosened a bit, but his head still felt woozy and light. A rush of blood followed by relief hit Hajime felt tension leech out of his body onto the floor.

“Are you okay?” Pekoyama’s arms were around his shoulders, steadying him.

“Yeah, I’m good…” Hajime swallowed, “Can I see Hiyoko and Mahiru?”

“Yes, they’re in the living room.” Pekoyama let go of him.

Hajime walked, feeling like jelly as they entered the living room. Kuzuryuu sat on a chair across from the couch. Saionji sat on the couch, curled by Koizumi. Her face was red and puffy. A box of tissues sat by her as well as held in her hands, crumpled. Koizumi was blinking, arms wrapped around Saionji, her face pale. As they walked in, Koizumi looked over at Hajime, her eyes slightly glossy and glazed over.

“Hiyoko, Mahiru.” Hajime wobbled over to them, nearly collapsing painfully onto the coffee table’s
edge, “How are you feeling?”

Saionji reached over and grabbed Hajime’s hand, a small hiccup erupting from her throat, “H-Hajime…”

Now that Hajime was close, he could see band-aids on Saionji’s hands, wrapped around her fingers and across her palm. As she moved her hand, Hajime spotted Koizumi’s gaze, following, her eyes narrowing before she looked away. Hajime could piece it together. Reaching over with his other hand, he lightly touched Koizumi’s hand.

“Mahiru?” He tried to curl his fingers around her hand.

She let him and looked over, “T-Thanks for coming over Hajime. Sorry it’s so… early.”

“It’s no problem.” Hajime assured, half standing up so he could sit on the couch. “I’m just glad you’re all right.”

“Yeah.” She looked away, “I just… one moment I was waiting for a glass of water and the next… Hiyoko was trying to wrestle a knife from my hands.”

“Did you dream anything?” Hajime lightly pushed.

“Not that I remember.” Koizumi softly answered, “Sorry…”

“Don’t apologize.” Saionji cut her off, “I-It’s fine…”

“I tried to hurt myself and then you got hurt stopping me.” Koizumi turned to her, brow furrowed, “I… what if this happens again?”

“We can’t worry about that now.” Pekoyama smoothly answered, “What we all need is rest. Go on, we’ll stay here.”

Saionji had a small smile on her face, “T-Thank you. Mahiru?”

“Okay.” She stood up, a bit shakily, hand still wrapped around Hajime’s, “Hiyoko?”

She stood up too. Hajime waited until they were standing properly before untangling his hand with theirs. The two of them walked slowly out of the room, heading down the hall and away. Hajime flopped onto the couch, all his energy gone. Immediately he felt the other side of the couch dip, Pekoyama sitting beside him. She leaned into the couch, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Thank you.” Hajime’s voice softly carried, “For coming here.”

“It’s nothing.” Kuzuryuu said from the other side, “We also messaged everyone about this. Thanks for phoning us. By the time we got here it was resolving, but if it hadn’t…”

Hajime forced himself to stop thinking about the possibilities, “I guess we’ll stay here? Keep an eye out?”

“I suppose so,” Kuzuryuu stood up, “Hey move over.”

He flopped at Hajime’s other side, “I’m exhausted.”

Curling into Hajime’s side, Kuzuryuu closed his eyes. Hajime nearly jumped, but before he could say anything, he felt Pekoyama scoot a bit closer, warm at his side.
“You can rest too Hajime.” She said, “I’ll keep watch.”

“Are you sure?” Hajime asked, “You need sleep too…”

“I’ll rest too.” She assured him.

Hajime wanted to say something, but he felt the last bit of his energy sap and his eyes closed, everything falling into a haze of sleep.

~

He woke to the feel of pressure and weight on all sides. Hajime yawned and wanted to stretch, but his arms were occupied, pinned down by the weight. Opening his eyes slowly, Hajime was greeted with warm grey blue eyes and a mop of auburn hair staring back at him.

“Good morning Hajime.” Komaeda softly said before pressing a light kiss to Hajime’s lips.

“N-Nagito?” Hajime jolted, “You’re… here?”

“Uh, yes?” Komaeda leaned back, “As soon as I read the message from Kuzuryuu I bolted over here.”

“How long have you been here?” Hajime asked.

“I just arrived.” Komaeda responded, “Have to admit, this is rather cute.”

“Cute?” Hajime blinked and watched as Komaeda moved away a bit, grinning. “What do you…”

“Hey, stop talking.” Kuzuryuu grumbled beside him, curling closer, “You’re too loud.”

Oh. Hajime flushed, glancing over. Kuzuryuu was curled at his side, a blanket thrown over his body, half of it on Hajime’s. At his other side Pekoyama, who had told Hajime she was going to keep watch, was dozing, head leaning back onto the couch, pushed against Hajime’s other side. That explained the weight and his inability to use his arms.

“I took a picture.” Komaeda added, eyes twinkling, “But don’t let me disturb your sleep. I’ll go ask Saionji for another blanket.”

He left the room, leaving Hajime staring. Wiggling a bit, Hajime felt Kuzuryuu tighten his grip on him. It was clear Hajime wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon. The couch was a bit uncomfortable, not the best way to sleep, but with Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama with him, Hajime couldn’t help but smile, some of the misfortune disappearing. Closing his eyes, Hajime fell asleep before Komaeda returned.

~

When Hajime woke for the second time, everyone was sitting in the living room. Tsumiki was hovering over Saionji, a first aid kit on the floor. Saionji had her face turned away, but Hajime could see a bit of pink tinging her cheeks. Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama hadn’t moved, but they were both awake, sitting upright. Blinking the rest of sleep from his eyes, Hajime straightened up and ran a hand through his hair, wishing he could wash up. As though reading his mind, Koizumi glanced over and pointed towards the hall.

“The bathroom is the first door to the left. You can wash up if you like.” She softly said.

“Uh thanks.” Hajime stood up, stretching and wobbling out the door.
The tub was tempting, but Hajime didn’t want to impose. Locating a stack of towels neatly set on the counter, Hajime quickly stripped and had a quick shower, savouring the heat and feel of being clean. It was damped a bit by having to return to his haphazardly picked clothes, but Hajime could deal with small disappointments.

On his way to the living room, Hajime spotted Hanamura at the stove, stirring something. Sonia, and Souda were also in the kitchen, filling the kettle and rummaging through the cabinets. The counter had tea cups and a tea pot as well as baking. Stepping inside, Hajime walked up to them.

“Here, let’s use these.” Sonia grabbed some small blue plates, handing them to Souda.

“Do you need any help?” Hajime asked.

They turned around, “Uh yes that would be wonderful.” Sonia said, “Could you take the teapot and cups to the living room?”

“Okay.” Hajime carefully picked the tea cups up first before looking at Hanamura, “What are you making?”

“I’m warming up milk and honey.” He replied, stirring the mixture, “My mom often made it when I had bad dreams or was stressed. It’s for Koizumi and Saionji.”

Hajime smiled and watched Hanamura’s face pinken a bit, “I-I just thought it would be a nice gesture…”

“That’s very kind of you.” Hajime said, moving away before Hanamura could retort.

When he returned to the living room, he saw everyone sitting. Saionji’s hands were rebandaged and laced on her lap. Tsumiki was fiddling with the first aid kit, reorganizing the contents. Hajime set the cups down and went back to the kitchen. Souda and Sonia were finishing with the baking, putting it on a big serving plate. Taking the teapot, Hajime walked with them back to the living room.

“Tea’s done.” Hajime announced before he started to pour cups and hand them to everyone.

“Thank you, Hajime.” Koizumi accepted the cup, “Sorry for making you guy do the work.”

“It’s not a problem.” Souda rubbed his head, “Though I’m still in awe how much baking you got around here.”

“I enjoy baking.” Koizumi replied with a small smile. “You can take some home if you like.”

“Thanks.” Souda beamed and sat down beside Owari.

Once everyone had tea, Hajime returned and sat beside Komaeda and Tsumiki. Hanamura came bustling in a moment later, handing a mug over to Saionji and Koizumi. Sipping his tea, Hajime waited as Koizumi cleared her throat and set her cup down. She still held onto her mug of milk and honey though.

“Thanks for coming over.” She softly said, “I’m… sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for.” Pekoyama said, “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes…” She gripped her pants.

“We got an idea of what happened.” Mitarai gently said, “But, not to be the negative one, but this is alarming.”
They hit the nail on the head. Hajime tried to not glance over at Owari and Kuzuryuu, but his gaze drifted over regardless. Mitarai was right. Just what was happening to them? Everything felt like it was spiralling out of his control, tangled yarn at his feet. Though, he supposed dreaming about a past life with murder was already more than enough to be considered losing control.

“I agree, this is alarming.” Kuzuryuu muttered, “Peko and I were discussing on the way over here... I think we can all agree this is about Ultimate Despair. So far, when we remember things about Ultimate Despair we remember doing horrible things to ourselves.”


“Okay, so Ultimate Despair means we did terrible things.” Mitarai summed up, “So, maybe we need to take this a step further.”

“A-A s-step f-further?” Tsumiki stammered.

“Hajime and many of us have had dreams about destroyed buildings, yes?” Mitarai asked, “Ultimate Despair sounds like a title given, perhaps by ourselves, but perhaps by other people.”

“Others?” Hanamura asked.

“Well, Kuzuryuu mentioned hurting ourselves... but we also hurt others.” Mitarai looked over at Sonia, who looked down. Souda also squirmed.

“So, city destroyed, we’re called Ultimate Despair, and then we’re placed into a Program.” Komaeda said, “We’ve discussed this before, yes? According to our timeline, we’re called Ultimate Despair and then the Program. Saionji said before, why would we be put into a Program only to kill each other and forget about it afterwards?”

“I don’t know.” Mitarai sighed.

Hajime bit his lip. They were going around in circles, unable to answer the question. Saionji was still right. There was no point in going into a Program, killing each other, and then forgetting about it later. It was like starting a game, but not saving and turning it off. All the progress would be deleted and they’d be back where they started.

“And we still don’t know why we’re not acting like ourselves.” Saionji pushed, “It’s more than just sleepwalking. Mahiru wasn’t herself. All she kept saying to me was how she didn’t want to hold a camera any more. It was like she was a completely different person.”

Different person... Hajime looked up, shoving his thoughts away. They weren’t entirely sure, but if the dreams were of another life, then that would mean they were different people. Wouldn’t it? Memories and experiences largely made up a person, didn’t they? Forgetting would change a person slightly, maybe even drastically depending on how much they forgot. Carefully Hajime looked over at Mitarai. Without any memories of before, Mitarai had the potential to be extremely different than the Mitarai Hajime knew. Forgetting changed them.

“Regardless, if we can’t remember what happens during this state, we got little to go on.” Kuzuryuu growled.

Forgetting... Hajime felt his brain cling to the word. They were doing a lot of that. Forgetting things in their dreams, and now forgetting actions and words said. A shiver down Hajime’s spine. If that was the case, it enforced Koizumi’s actions as terrifying. What brought her to the state of willingly holding a knife to her fingers, wanting to cut them off?
“Either way, we should be glad this was resolved without injury.” Sonia firmly said, “Even though we have more questions than answers…”

That was the problem, wasn’t it? Every time something happened, they would have gaps in their memories or not enough time to ask questions. It was the same with Sonia, the time fleeting. Only Kuzuryuu and Owari had been in long states and even then, nothing was really gained. The more they learned, the more questions they had.

Returning to his house never felt so good. Hajime fumbled to his door, letting Komaeda pry the keys out of his hands. The chill of the day followed them inside, but Komaeda was already turning the heaters on, bustling around like he owned the place. It made Hajime smile, something warm flutter in his stomach. Following Komaeda inside, Hajime watched as he filled the kettle and turned it on before rummaging through his cabinets, pulling mugs out.

“Did you buy more tea?” Komaeda asked over his shoulder.

“Yeah, I put it in the other cabinet.” Hajime pointed.

“Okay. No offense, but I’m not in the mood for a black tea. I think green is better.”

“That’s fine.” Hajime smiled, “I barely had anything at Mahiru and Hiyoko’s place. I’ll drink anything.”

“You could help me.” Komaeda teased. “It’s rude to make a guest do all the work.”

Hajime walked in and hugged Komaeda from behind, resting his head against Komaeda’s hair, breathing in the smell of caramelized sugar and something floral. The smell grounded him, made the past few hours feel like a detached event, floating over Hajime’s brain like a small cloud.

“But you’re not a guest.” Hajime told him. “My place can be your home too.”

As the words left Hajime’s mouth he felt a flush fill his cheeks. How… cheesy and corny of him. He tried to pull away, to tell Komaeda, but he felt Komaeda’s hands grip his arms, keeping him in place.

“You… do you mean that?” Komaeda asked.

“Yes.” Hajime pushed his blushing aside, “I mean it.”

“That’s… really… nice.” Komaeda’s hands tightened on Hajime’s arms, “My place is your home too, you know.” He added.

The blush returned in full force. Hajime smiled widely and pulled Komaeda closer, “Okay…”

He felt Komaeda shift in his arms, until he was facing him. Their lips met, almost naturally, angled to fit. They slid together with ease, a silent show of practice. Hajime pressed deeper, prying Komaeda’s mouth open, pushing him against the counter. Their tongues curled against each other’s and Komaeda let out a keen that went straight through Hajime’s body, igniting his blood. Komaeda’s hands moved from Hajime’s arms and wrapped around Hajime’s shoulders, canting his body closer, as though he was trying to pull Hajime into him. The stress of Saionji and Koizumi and the past few hours drained away slowly.

When their kiss ended, a thin trail of saliva falling from their lips, Hajime took a gulp of air and pressed again, peppering kisses against Komaeda lightly, nibbling a bit on Komaeda’s lip.
“H-Hajime…” Komaeda’s voice was all sorts of breathy, “Our tea will get cold…”

“Cold?” Hajime pulled away, looking at the saliva gleaming on Komaeda’s skin, “You’re implying we’ll be occupied for a long time. Are you suggesting we do… something else besides drinking tea?”

Komaeda groaned, “You… you’re teasing me.” He tried to wiggle away, “I’ll get the water…”

Hajime stopped him, kissing him again, loving how Komaeda melted into his arms, opened his mouth, eagerly kissed back. When they pulled away Hajime could see the blush on Komaeda’s face.

“I’m not opposed to postponing tea time for a bit.” Hajime told him.

Owlishly Komaeda blinked before a light giggle filled the room. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Hajime’s ear, nibbling a bit before hotly whispering.

“I think, we should turn the heaters on in your bedroom.”

~

They were so warm afterwards, the cool of the house was almost welcome. Hajime curled into Komaeda and traced his shoulder, lightly dancing at the skin. Komaeda shuffled and curled his free arm around Hajime’s back, pushing them together, tangling their legs.

“Feel better?” Komaeda asked.

“I feel sore.” Hajime retorted.

Komaeda laughed, “I won’t apologize.”

“Right.” Hajime tried to sit up a bit, wincing, “I’ll start filling the tub. I can’t spend all day in bed. I got some new assignments to work on.”

“Assignments?” Komaeda asked, “What’s the theme this time?”

“Self portrait.” Hajime replied, “I can’t just paint a picture of my face.”

“I wouldn’t mind that.” Komaeda grinned, “Just a picture of your beautiful face gracing my wall.”

Hajime smacked Komaeda lightly, “You’re not doing that with a picture or photo.”

“Damn, there goes my idea of asking Koizumi.” Komaeda giggled.

Koizumi wouldn’t… Hajime bit his lip. He didn’t want to ask. Some things were best left untouched. Getting out of bed, Hajime wrapped a robe around himself and slipped out of the warm room, towards his bathroom. No doubt Komaeda would want to join him. Hajime blushed, but after he started the tub, he made sure to grab two towels.

~

“Hinata, I had a dream…” – Tsumiki

“I mean… it’s okay to message you, right?” – Tsumiki

“Yes, it’s fine Tsumiki. You can tell me.” – Hajime
“Okay… I dreamed of being in a room in a hospital. I was pulling curtains closed.” – Tsumiki

“There was also a camera. I was filming with a robe and canvas bag on my head.” – Tsumiki

“Do you know why?” – Hajime

“No… sorry.” – Tsumiki

“That’s okay. Thank you for telling me.” – Hajime

~

The town was old, made of traditional houses built of stone and wood. Heat poured in and scorched Hajime as he walked along dirt roads. Everything was green, despite the heat and the chirp of cicadas filled the space. Dust clung to all the buildings, but nothing was damaged, merely suspended in time. It reminded Hajime of ghost towns, the ones in Western books and movies. Everything was a time capsule, left to rot the way it was built.

Hajime walked and walked, by passing stores and homes, trying to determine what they were used for. No other animals scurried by. No people walked. It was just Hajime. Eeriness should have pressed into him, smothered him with tension and fear, but Hajime only felt content, almost safe, like visiting a childhood memory, before fear and rationality over took everything. It was as though the town was painted in a child’s curiosity, wonder, and awe. Hajime’s heart ached with an unknown string of nostalgia. Nostalgia to what, Hajime wasn’t sure, but it burned into his core, making longing drip painfully inside him.

The road curved slightly and soon Hajime was at the outskirts of the town, facing a field of green. A few trees were scattered as well as some wild flowers, but other than that it was mainly flat, with a few hills and bumps.

In the distance was someone with long dark hair, back turned to Hajime, staring out into the field. Something sped up in Hajime’s heart and he began to walk faster, until his walk turned into a jog, and then the jog into a sprint. As Hajime got closer to the figure, he could spot the suit, black and crisp as usual.

“What was that?” Hajime breathed out.

He turned and raised his hand, “Hinata.”

Hajime reached out and took his hand. Their hands curled into each other, as though they were trying to merge into one.

“Where are we?” Hajime asked.

Kamukura didn’t answer and instead pulled Hajime closer, until they were staring at each other, “Why can’t I get rid of you?” He asked.

“Me?” Hajime stared.

“Or more accurately…” Kamukura leaned close and touched their foreheads together, “Why won’t you…”

~

What was that?
Hajime bolted up and immediately fell back into his bed, curling into the heat. The dream replayed in his mind, over and over. What was Kamukura going to ask him? Rolling over Hajime tried to fill the question out, but his brain was hazy with sleep. Sighing Hajime grabbed his sketchbook and began to write out the dream and lightly sketch. He continued until his alarm went off.

~

Hajime rotated his shoulders, wincing. Everything felt limp, like a cooked noodle. His legs wobbled a bit as he walked out of Kuzuryuu’s house, his knees knocking a bit. Nothing felt connected to his brain. His legs felt like they were moving on his own, on autopilot. Groaning a bit, Hajime knew he’d wake up sore. At least he had a large tub. A long soak in hot water sounded very appealing. Digging into his jacket pocket, Hajime pulled his keys out, unlocking his car.

“I should have taken today off…” Souda muttered beside him, “I’m hurting all over…”

“Ouch…” Hajime patted his shoulder lightly, “What time do you work?”

“I got an hour and a half… but still…” Souda pulled his phone out, “There isn’t enough time to walk back to my place and then go to work.”

“I can drive you home.” Hajime offered, “And to work if you like. I got nothing else planned for today.”

“Really?” Souda asked, “Thanks Hajime. I do warn you, my place is messy.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage.” Hajime assured him. “Let’s go.”

They walked to his car, Hajime immediately turning it on, welcoming the warm air. Souda sat comfortably in the passenger’s seat, stretching a bit before fiddling with the radio. Hajime started to drive, letting Souda pick the music. The roads were clean and relatively dry, though snow piles still covered the sides, making the roads feel even more narrow than usual. Hopefully they’d come and remove it soon. Residential areas were the worse. Hajime hoped no one else was driving on the opposite side. He wanted to get to a major road without any complications.

“I’m so ready for it to get warmer.” Souda sighed, pressing his hands closer to the heat, “The garage is freezing all the time. I swear, even with heating… I think they set it lower to try and save money.”

“Are you serious?” Hajime shivered at the idea, “Sure they save money, but they’re freezing their workers in the process. Isn’t that counter-productive? But you don’t have to stay in the garage the whole shift, right?”

“Depends…” Souda replied, “But yesterday Miyashita-san came by and we had a hell of a time trying to figure out what was wrong with her car. By the time we solved it, my fingers felt numb and my toes too.” He grimaced, “I’ll hope for the best.”

“Good luck.” Hajime offered as he made the turn to Souda’s residential area, “I feel so spoilt. I’ve spent most of December with Nagito. But I’m back in my place now.”

“Really?” Souda asked, “I’d wait until March for sure.”

The temptation… Hajime’s feet tingled as if reminding him how cold his place really is without central heating. Having only a heater and kotatsu wasn’t always the best… but he wasn’t going to stay with Komaeda any longer and infringe on his good will.

“I wish.” Hajime honestly said, “But I’d feel bad. Besides… I can manage… even though it sucks.”
Souda laughed before it trailed off suddenly. He looked down. Hajime carefully pulled to the side, right by Souda’s apartment and looked over at him. Souda’s hands were curled into his pants, shaking a bit.

“Kazuichi?” Hajime ventured, “What’s wrong?”

“Hey, Hajime, I was thinking.” Souda started, “Could I… stay with you?”

Hajime paused, blinking a moment, letting the words register, “Uh… like room with me?”

“Yeah…” Souda shuffled, “It’s just… what happened with Sonia, Owari, and then Koizumi… it has been on my mind for a bit. I don’t want to be alone if something bad happens.” He shivered.

Hajime bit his lip. He too was alone. Sure, Komaeda would come over and stay the night or vice versa, but… Hajime shuddered. He could see Koizumi hovering over the sink with a knife to her hand, ready to hack her fingers off. If Saionji hadn’t been there… Hajime blanched. Something could have happened, they were just lucky. Souda’s fear was logical. Having someone around was a good idea. Asking him was a good idea; a stranger could lead to complications. Hajime didn’t want to worry about explaining.

“You don’t have to say yes or answer me right away.” Souda quickly said, “Having a roommate is a lot and…”

“No, no it isn’t that.” Hajime cut him off, “I think that’s a good idea. I just…” He blushed, “I’ve never had a roommate before…”

“Me neither.” Souda blurted out, “I don’t want to pressure you.”

“But, we can try. Like a trial run.” Hajime assured, “I do have a spare room with art supplies in there. I could clean it out and… Oh, but I’ll have to tell Nagito too because… well…”

He didn’t finish his sentence. Souda launched himself at Hajime, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. The smell of oil and metal clung to Souda, but it was normal, almost comforting. Hajime hugged him back.

“Thank you.” Souda said, “I just… I couldn’t stop seeing Koizumi, imagining her cutting off her fingers…”

“No problem.” Hajime replied, “We can give this a shot. I just hope it doesn’t end up like a sitcom.”

“I’ll be the best roommate ever I promise!” Souda announced, “I’ll ace this trial run!”

~

“A trial?” Komaeda repeated with a smile. “For being a roommate?”

“Yes,” Hajime set a large canvas by his couch, “Just to see how being roommates works. You…” Hajime paused, “I mean you don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all.” Komaeda hummed, “This sounds like a good idea. I’ve heard about troubles and problems from roommates. Some people say knowing the person before is harder.”

“I’m hoping not.” Hajime bit his lip, “I don’t want a strain on our friendship.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that.” Komaeda assured before walking back to the room, “Where do you want your oil paints?”
“Set those on the coffee table.” Hajime instructed. “But leave the brushes. I’ll bring those to the kitchen. They need a good wash anyways.”

“Okay.”

Komaeda left and Hajime turned to his paintings. There was some space in his storage, but he’d have to wrap up the paintings to protect them from dust. Picking out the finished pieces, Hajime went to the kitchen and grabbed a few large, clear plastic bags. Despite all the work, Hajime could feel a buzz of excitement in his body. Having Souda around would be nice. Even though Hajime had Komaeda, he wasn’t the only person Hajime wanted to hang out with. Sure, some of his privacy would be compromised from time to time, but things could be worked out when they arose. Smiling to himself, Hajime hurried back to his paintings. There was still a lot of work to do.

~

Staying over at Komaeda’s was a good idea. Hajime snuggled into the bedding and felt sleep slowly drain from his mind. In the distance, he heard Komaeda sitting up, shifting. Hajime stretched, reaching out, trying to locate his hand or something. More shifting, restless, loud. Hajime frowned. What was Komaeda doing?

Yawning Hajime sat up and opened his eyes. His vision cleared long enough to see Komaeda’s hand coming towards him, clamping over his mouth. Hajime felt the headboard against the back of his head and warm thighs straddling his hips. Blushing, Hajime looked up at Komaeda, teasing words ready to fire the moment Komaeda took his hand off, but those immediately dried.

Komaeda’s eyes were glazed. Like Tsumiki’s. Like Sonia’s. Like Kuzuryuu’s. There was something heavy behind his eyes, a balloon in a storm, tossing about in the wind and rain. Hajime’s heart pounded, creating the only sound in the room, before Komaeda shifted closer, his hand slipping from Hajime’s mouth.

“W-What’s wrong?” Hajime tried.

A flash and Hajime felt a sharp pain as fingernails dug into his wrist, poking at the skin. Komaeda cocked his head and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Who are you?” He asked.

Hajime’s jaw unhinged. Did he just hear what he thought he heard? He waited for Komaeda to smile, to tell him he was joking, but instead Komaeda’s eyes narrowed and he scooted closer, his hand wrapping tighter around Hajime’s wrist. Nails dug into Hajime’s skin and he wanted to pull away.

“Did you not hear me?” Komaeda asked. “I asked who you are.” He paused. “Unless you want to hear my name first?” His face broke into a smile, jagged around the edges, “How… interesting. But you don’t want to sully your ears with a worthless name like mine.”

Worthless? Hajime couldn’t understand, the words not wanting to wrap in his mind. Komaeda was smiling, like he hadn’t put himself down. An air, almost sultry with something sharp crackling in the distance radiated from Komaeda. Hajime swallowed and could taste the sour tang, the hint of bitter underneath coating his tongue.

“Do you always keep people waiting on answers?” Komaeda’s eyes narrowed slightly, his fingers digging into Hajime’s skin.

The pain dug into Hajime’s mind, cutting his thoughts. Jerking his arm, Hajime stared at Komaeda.
His eyes were still, a smooth layer hiding ripples and turbulence underneath. There was no doubt Komaeda was lost in some dream, just like Koizumi, Sonia, or Owari. A laugh almost erupted from Hajime’s throat, a burst of relief mixed in with panic. This was bad, but at least Komaeda wasn’t alone. There was no time limit, as far as they knew, to how long Komaeda would be like this, but sitting around wasn’t going to help.

“I’m Hajime.” He answered, “You can let me go now.”

“Hajime?” Komaeda cocked his head at a painful angle, “Only giving me your given name? How scandalous.”

The way he said the last part. Hajime shivered as the syllables dripped from Komaeda’s lips, complete with a serene smile. Still, he let go of Hajime’s wrist. Hajime could feel the indent of Komaeda’s nails and could see small crescent shapes dug into his skin. Ignoring Komaeda, Hajime reached over and grabbed his phone. So far, Komaeda wasn’t acting violent, but Hajime wasn’t taking any chances. Dialing Kuzuryuu, Hajime angled himself so he could keep an eye on Komaeda.

“Hajime?” Kuzuryuu’s voice was surprisingly alert.

“Fuyuhiko, something’s wrong with Nagito.” Hajime laid everything out in a single breath. Across from him, Hajime saw Komaeda lift his head as he heard his name.

“I want to ask if you’re kidding, but that would be too good to be true.” Kuzuryuu sighed, “Has he done anything?”

“He just asked for my name.” Hajime replied.

“Okay. Good.” Kuzuryuu slowly said, “Do you think you’ll be all right?”

“I think so.” Hajime said.

“What about his parents?” Kuzuryuu pressed, “We don’t know how long this will last. You can’t keep him away from his family for a day.”

Hajime felt a chill down his spine. Kuzuryuu was right. Perhaps, he should get them out of the house as quickly as possible, so he wasn’t around anyone he knew. “Okay. I understand.”

“Good. I think you should come here too. So far, it’s fine, but if Komaeda gets violent…”

“Right. Okay. Thanks.” Hajime hung up.

As soon as he hung up, Komaeda invaded his personal space, bending down, and looking up. His back contorted like a snake and Hajime wished he’d stop. Komaeda shifted and Hajime heard a pop and crack echo in his back. He winced.

“You were talking to Kuzuryuu.” Komaeda stated, “Are you one of his lackeys?”

Lackey? Hajime raised an eyebrow, “What makes you think I’m a lackey?”

“Well, you don’t look too special, too talented.” Komaeda paused, “Unless you are talented at something?”

Talent… Hajime’s mind flashed to the Kamukura Project and the Reserve Course. The notes were in his sketchbook and Hajime could see the words, how he accepted the Project… became Kamukura…
“Never mind. I’ll take your silence as a no.” Komaeda straightened his back, “So, where are we?”

Hajime couldn’t just tell Komaeda the truth, who knew how he’d respond. Based on the dreams the idea of having a house and parents alive wouldn’t sit well with Komaeda while he was in this state. Best tell half truths.

“A house.” Hajime answered.

Komaeda rolled his eyes, “I can see that.”

The tone bit into Hajime, digging into his skin. Hearing it come from Komaeda hurt Hajime more than the words. It felt so wrong, but Hajime held his tongue. Getting into a fight wasn’t what he wanted. Right now, he had to get Komaeda out of his house. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be difficult.

“We’re leaving.” Hajime told him, getting out of the bed.

“Leaving?” Komaeda asked, “Where to? Kuzuryuu’s?”

“Sure.” Hajime agreed.

“So, you are a lackey.” Komaeda laughed, “Though why Kuzuryuu lets you call him by his given name is beyond me.”

What was Hajime going to say to that? He simply shrugged and went to Komaeda’s closet. Hopefully, when Komaeda was better he wouldn’t mind Hajime wearing his clothes. Picking a shirt and pants out, Hajime looked over at Komaeda, who was standing, staring at his left hand in puzzlement, turning it around.

“You should get changed.” Hajime told him.

Komaeda blinked and looked up, arm dropping to his side. “I would but…” He touched his neck, “I seem to be missing my clothes. Well, the ones I last remember wearing.” He gave a smile to Hajime, “Have you seen them?”

“No?” Hajime raised an eyebrow.

“No? Not even the chain?” Komaeda mused.

Chain? Hajime glanced at Komaeda’s hand, touching his neck and suddenly didn’t want to know. “No, not that either.”

Komaeda’s hand dropped, “Oh well, many mysteries seem to be plaguing me today.” He walked over to Hajime and suddenly was invading his space, staring at him, eyes hard and unblinking. “Also, I heard you call me Nagito to Kuzuryuu.”

Oh crap. How was Hajime going to explain that? Not only was it his given name, but Komaeda was under the impression they didn’t know each other.

“It’s not Nagito or whatever Kuzuryuu has told you.” He sighed, “I suppose it’s been a while since I last saw him, so it’s understandable he’d give you outdated information.”

Not his name? Hajime felt something hard form in his stomach and his lungs stop working. He wanted to ask what he should call him, but Komaeda did that for him.

“It’s Servant.” He said.
Hajime’s blood stilled and his brain flashing to Sonia on her kitchen. The chill he felt when he heard her call Komaeda Servant paled in comparison to hearing Komaeda call himself that. A full shiver ran down his spine and Hajime hoped, it wasn’t showing on his face.

“Okay. Nice to meet you.” Hajime’s voice wavered just a touch.

Chapter End Notes

Cart and Basket: In Japan you always use a basket to put your groceries in as the carts aren't suitable for actually holding your groceries. The cart is simply meant to help you move your basket around.

Apples: So, I am currently living in Nagano-ken and one of our main exports are apples. And I have to tell you, fresh apples grown locally are amazing, hands down 10/10 come to Nagano and eat our apples. They're a late fall harvest and all through winter you can find them everywhere (sadly I can't now... but I can eat oranges!).

Snow in boots: If I could get a dollar every time this happened to me I'd be very rich.

Akane: Like Saionji and Koizumi, I felt like I needed a formal scene of Owari telling Hajime he can call her by her first name.

Tubs: Tubs in Japan have this great ability to fill to a desired amount of water. In my house I can even set how many liters of water I want my tub to fill to. When it's done a chime will play (mine also has a voice announce that it's done. It's lovely.)
Hello! Another chapter and so close to my birthday!

First, I need to apologize to everyone. I started writing this chapter and about 3,000 words in, I realized I was still in Waking mode and wrote in Komaeda's POV for two scenes. I debated for a long while and decided... to just keep it. I know I've mainly kept to Hajime's POV and I honestly didn't want to switch the perspective, but I really like what I wrote. I've made the choice to keep it. So... if it's jarring to you to have Komaeda's POV twice in this chapter... I'm sorry.

This chapter was hard to write. Scenes are long... but not much has happened. Still, I had things happen I've been meaning to have happen for a long time. (The scenes just kept getting pushed away!) Things are set up and I hope I can get to those scenes soon.

As always, thank you for leaving kudos, comments, and bookmarks. My day is always made when I see those. Enjoy the chapter!

Servant examined the room. How he had arrived was blurry, filled with holes and gaps. A shiver ran down his spine, tingling through his body, but not due to the lack of memory. A chuckle formed slightly in his throat, before collapsing, stilting his breath for a fraction of a second. Most considered memory loss a source of terror, of unknown, but memory loss was the least of Servant’s worries. There were things eating away at his brain for so long that Servant barely considered gaps a source of concern. What concerned him was the room.

He touched the desk again, feeling the smooth, well-kept wood. There were no dents, no bumps, no sign of animals eating away or of time and destruction deforming it. The desk stood still, encased in a bubble of stability. A chuckle managed to escape his lips, soft and whispery. Stability… that was one way to describe not just the desk, but the entire room.

Everything stood clean, untouched, and safe. The bed was warm with no holes in the covers. He could stand on the floor with bare feet and not worry about glass, rocks, or other unwanted objects touching his skin. Smoke, decay, filth, none of the smells touched the air, the room, or the walls. It was off putting, tilting his inner clock. Servant’s fingers twitched, curling around an invisible object.

How was this room so clean, so nice? Servant clutched his hands, feeling a jolt run down his back when he felt nails bite into his left hand. (How he even had his left hand was another concern of his, one that had to be pondered later.) An icy sensation, one dripping down to his feet rapidly rolled through him. His body swayed and Servant reached out for the desk once again, but the feel of smooth wood only sent curls of curiosity and confusion.

This wasn’t possible, at least it shouldn’t be. Even when he visited Sonia or Kuzuryuu he couldn’t get away from the looming destruction, the smell of decay and rot filling his lungs. Despair had clung to everything in a thick, vicious miasma, poisoning everything. But this room, this space was breathable, light.
“You should get changed.”

Servant looked up. The boy (‘Hajime’, his mind supplied) repeated, arms crossed over his chest. He had changed into a turquoise sweater, a colour that pierced Servant’s eyes. It was like the ocean wrapped into cotton. Servant’s gaze lingered (why, he wasn’t sure) for longer than socially acceptable. Hajime’s cheeks pinkened, catching Servant in the act, and he coughed politely. Servant forced himself to look away and speak.

“There are clothes for me here too?” Servant asked.

“Yeah,” Hajime pointed to a closet and dresser, “Pick whatever you want.”

There were enough clothes to fill a closet and dresser? Servant stared. That shouldn’t be possible… unless this place was one of Sonia or Kuzuryuu’s. Probably Kuzuryuu, given the phone call. Servant’s mouth twitched. If that was the case, then this… talentless boy was infringing on Kuzuryuu’s kindness. Not that Servant could judge given that Hajime hadn’t directly disputed his lack of talent. Servant laughed. Who was he kidding? He couldn’t say much. He had a worthless talent.

“Um… Na – Servant?” Hajime tried again.

He was about to call him Nagito. Servant’s eyes narrowed, but he let it slide. Talentless people shouldn’t have high expectations put on them. Servant exhaled and nodded, walking over to the closet. Judging by what Hajime was wearing, the weather was cool. Grabbing a thick grey sweater and some dark jeans, Servant turned to Hajime, who was watching from a distance. Did he expect him to change in front of him?

“You could turn around.” Servant told him.

“Uh… right.” Hajime blushed, “Or you can use the bathroom?”

Bathroom? Servant turned and spotted the door, somehow missing it. That was the better option. Immediately he walked to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. The bathroom was just as clean and neat as the bedroom. Setting the clothes on the counter, Servant started to change, but immediately froze.

His hair… it was auburn, just like… Servant’s lungs slowly deflated, clinging to itself like a wet sock on a foot. First his arm… then his hair. Sure, hair dye could be the answer to this, but even with a splotchy memory what would possess him to willingly dye his hair? Servant never felt the need to before… so why now? He tried to think, but his head sharply ached. That would have to wait too. He dressed quickly and avoided looking at his reflection.

“You’re done.” Hajime obviously pointed out, “Let’s go.”

Servant glanced at the pile of clothes on the floor. They were just going to leave them there? He shrugged and followed Hajime, who was peering out of the door, poking his head out. It was… silent and sneaky… he didn’t want something or someone finding them… interesting…

“Okay… let’s go.” Hajime muttered to himself, slipping out.

The hallway was the same strange clean the room and bathroom were. Carpet was clean, no bugs crawling through, the walls smooth, electricity running without flickering. Hajime lead them to the stairs and gingerly stepped, wincing when a step creaked. Servant followed him. As they descended downward, he smelt food, warm and comforting. His stomach lurched and his mouth watered. When was the last time he ate? It must have been recent; the hunger pains were merely light pokes and
“The entrance is that way.” Hajime pointed to the left, “Let’s just…”

“Hajime, Nagito, you’re awake.”

Hajime froze, eyes widening slightly, before he turned to the source of the voice. Servant followed his gaze, and felt shock, numbing a cold fill every crevice of his body. Standing in front of him was his mother and father. Alive. Well. Healthy. Not bleeding in the burning metal husk of an airplane. That… wasn’t possible. A dizzy spell hit Servant, spiraling. A sob, choked and stifling, threatened to escape. He looked over to Hajime, as though he’d give an explanation. Was this their idea of a joke? Kuzuryuu usually had more taste than this…but Hajime wasn’t sparing a glance.

His parents walked over, still smiling. His father reached out hand falling onto Servant’s head, ruffling his hair. The action was smooth, thoughtless, like a reflex rather than a planned motion. Servant froze, felt the warmth of the man’s hand seep into his body. He barely held back a sob. Servant wished he had something to cling to.

“Uh, yes we are.” Hajime recovered, voice a bit shaky, “We were just about to go…”

“Did you eat breakfast?” His voice sounded warm, full of life. Servant almost cried.

“No… but we’re going to see Fuyuhiko.” Hajime answered.

For a moment something hot, burning filled Servant. No… how could Hajime say that? Servant wanted to stay, eat with his parents. Even though he wasn’t sure what exactly this was (a dream, perhaps? Hallucination?), but he didn’t care. Servant wanted to throw himself into his parent’s arms, even if it was a moment. Damn whatever expectations Kuzuryuu had.

“Nagito?” His father asked, “Are you okay?”

Servant relaxed his fingers and noted how his body was swaying to the ground, legs giving out from under him. “I… uh…” He glanced at Hajime, who was walking towards him, kneeling. “I’m… fine… dad.” He savoured the word. How long had it been since he could say it?

“Are you sure sweetie?” His mother asked, also kneeling, stroking his head, “Did you sleep well?”

This was a dream. This had to be. Servant wanted to laugh, to yell, to find some way to express the emotions bubbling inside him, but all he could do was stare, voice caught in his throat. It was Hajime, hands suddenly around his shoulders, gently easing him up, taking him to a living room (clean and polished like the rest of the place), and sat him on the couch. In his peripheral Servant saw his parents follow. Everything was going fuzzy, static playing in his ears.

“… yeah we’ll just give it a moment… yes we’re having breakfast with Fuyuhiko…”

Hajime’s explanation hit his ears, but Servant couldn’t hear the reply. All he could focus on was the pounding in his ears and the swirling in his brain. The couch dissolved under him and Servant felt the cold sensation of dropping.

~

Hajime waited until Komaeda’s parents were gone, before turning to him. That reaction was… unexpected, but welcome. Given the other reactions, having Komaeda nearly collapse and start crying in the hallway was immensely better. Not ideal, but with Koizumi’s recent… experience floating in the forefront of his mind, Hajime was going to take the small victories.
Komaeda was bent over, head practically touching his knees. His breathing was shallow, his back barely rising, his shoulders hunched. Hajime curled his arm around him tighter and stroked his back in soothing circles. Komaeda didn’t stop him, so Hajime continued. Idly Hajime grabbed his phone with his other hand, checking the time. Maybe he should tell Kuzuryuu they might not be over soon? It was hard to say. Hajime looked at Komaeda, who was still taking deep breathes, and wished he could dive into his brain, see what he was thinking.

“Are you…” Hajime winced at the lack of better term, “Are you okay?”

Komaeda looked over, “Do I look okay?” His voice snapped and bit into Hajime.

“Um…” Hajime reeled back from the tone. “I only…”

“You’re so worthless. It’s a wonder why Kuzuryuu keeps you around.” Komaeda sighed.

Worthless… the word sunk into Hajime, digging into his skin and muscles. The blunt way he said it, the lack of hesitation. Hajime’s heart twisted, curling around anger, sadness, and hurt. He shoved it away. This wasn’t really Komaeda talking. At this moment it wasn’t the Komaeda he knew, his boyfriend. This was someone whose personality was linked to the dreams (the fourth trial danced in Hajime’s mind, reminding him of how brutal Komaeda was).

“Never mind.” Komaeda huffed, “Don’t answer that.”

Hajime held his tongue. He wasn’t going to start something with Komaeda. “Ok then, if you’re all right, we can go see Fuyuhiko.”

Another flash in Komaeda’s eyes, one darkening then lightening, appeared quickly. Hajime froze. Did Komaeda not want to go see Kuzuryuu? Why? He knew Kuzuryuu and didn’t object earlier so why now? Why was there something wrong now?

“Fine. I suppose we should go… considering you told him we would.” Komaeda glared at him.

“Uh… okay then.” Hajime stood up, offering his hand, “Let’s go.”

Komaeda stood up and brushed past him, leaving Hajime with his hand hanging in the air. A stab and twist filled his stomach. Hajime sucked in a breath and dropped his hand.

Seeing the clean streets with roads intact, cars pristine, and homes undamaged further added to the questions swirling in Servant’s mind. Also, it was winter, which further explained why Hajime handed him a heavy jacket and boots without a word. The air tasted clean, undiluted with smog and ash, crisp undertones filling his lungs as Servant breathed.

Hajime lead them to a car, one that he opened and got inside the driver’s seat. Servant followed, carefully going to the passenger’s side. Inside, Hajime was fiddling with the heat and radio with an ease oozing familiarity.

“Do you want to pick the music?” Hajime asked.

Music? Servant stared. Did he want to sit for an undisclosed amount of time, trapped in a vehicle, with music in the background? He grimaced, “I’d prefer no music.”

“Okay.” Hajime replied, “That’s fine.”
Hajime started to drive, the car slowly moving through the snow, careful of the streets. Servant leaned into the seat and stared out the window, staring at the scenery. How long had it been since he had seen order and calm? He tried to think, but everything was still hazy. Panic skirted around the edges of his mind, biting at the ends, but Servant shoved it away. A breakdown wouldn’t help or answer anything. Gaps in his memory were the norm. Servant slowly chanted that in his mind, letting the reassurance fill the holes in his brain.

“So… are you cold?” Hajime asked.

Servant looked over and scowled. Not that he wanted to have a conversation with someone as useless as Hajime, but if he was forced to, he’d like one beyond the small talk little old ladies had over tea.

“So you always ask the obvious?” Servant scoffed, “Or are you just bad at conversations?”

Hajime winced, hands gripping the wheel tightly. “Just making sure you’re comfortable.”

“The only discomfort I’m feeling is from your pitiful attempts to converse.” Servant rolled his eyes, “If you’re going to talk to me, at least be interesting and not boring. A challenge for someone like you I’m sure.” He added.

His hands were white on the wheel and Hajime was biting his lip so hard Servant was sure it would bleed if he bit harder. “Fine. I was wondering what you remember.”

“Remember?” Servant leaned into the seat, staring out at the road, “Why does it matter to you? Oh, or did Kuzuryuu tell you to interrogate me?” His eyes lit up, “Following orders like a good boy?”

“No…” Hajime protested, “I’m asking out of curiosity.”

“Right.” Servant laughed, “No need to feel embarrassed over following orders. That’s all people like you are good for.” He crossed his arms over his lap, “But it’s all a mystery. I remember the destroyed town and buildings. Death and despair for everyone.” He wheezed through his laughter, “So, seeing this place intact is bizarre.”

“So… you don’t remember anything about the Program?” Hajime asked.

“Program?” Servant cocked his head, “No?”

“What about Kamukura?” Hajime asked.

The name came out of nowhere. Servant felt his breath shorten. How did Hajime know that name? Kamukura was virtually unknown, so elusive that Servant was sure not even the members of Ultimate Despair knew him. So how did this useless, talentless boy know? Did he run into Kamukura? Even if he did, Kamukura wasn’t the person to go around telling his name.

“How?” Servant’s voice croaked and cracked, “Do you know Kamukura?” Hajime sharply turned in response. Servant felt like bugs were tickling his skin, “Well?” He pressed. “Kamukura doesn’t go around telling his name to worthless people. And don’t say Kuzuryuu told you.” He added, “I’m sure even Ultimate Despair don’t know him.”

“Ultimate Despair?” Hajime squeaked.

“Are you that dense?” Servant snapped, “Destroyed the world to spread Despair? Kuzuryuu is one of them? But never mind that. Answer me. How do you know Kamukura?”
Hajime performed another sharp turn, speeding a bit down the road before stopping in front of a large traditional complex. It had to be Kuzuryuu’s. Shutting the car off, Hajime reached for the door, but Servant lunged, grabbing his arm.

“Answer me.” He pulled Hajime closer, “Well?”

“I… it’s a long story.” Hajime stammered, “I’ll tell you later…”

Servant watched as Hajime ducked his head a bit, not looking him in the eyes. His hand tightened on Hajime’s arm, pulling him back harder, “You’re just saying that. Answer me now or…”

“Hajime. Komaeda.”

It was Pekoyama’s voice. Servant nearly gave himself whiplash he jerked his head up so fast. She stood there, wearing a coat and scarf, face turning pink from the cold. Behind her the gate was open and footprints trailed into the snow, towards them. She must have just come to greet them. He stared. Something was off about her… there was a calm air like always, but there was a lack of intent. Pekoyama was usually like a panther in the woods, silently stalking, but now she was just the woods, serene, no ruthlessness intent.

And she called him by the wrong name.

“It’s Servant.” He sighed, “Though Kuzuryuu hasn’t seen me in a while…”

“Servant…” Pekoyama dutifully repeated, “Okay. Let’s go inside.”

Hajime pulled out of his grasp and shut the door neatly behind him, practically scrambling after her. Servant scowled. His question was evaded… probably a round of bad luck. Shutting the car door, he followed them, silently grateful for the warmth of the house. Pekoyama and Hajime walked beside each other, talking in hushed tones. Servant wanted to lean in, to listen to their conversation, but was stopped when they came to a room.

Kuzuryuu sat there, by a table, fiddling with his phone. Servant stopped. Something was off about him too. Like Pekoyama he was calm, but there was nothing lurking in him. It was off putting. Everything was off putting. From the moment, he woke up everything was out of order. This couldn’t be a dream; everything felt too real and he wasn’t creative enough to conjure up a scenario like this. But, if this was real, how was it possible? Could Kuzuryuu or someone have enough money and time to create this as an elaborate joke? If so, it was a good one… complete with Kuzuryuu still having both eyes.

“Sit down.” Kuzuryuu pointed to the space by the table.

Servant sat, “Would you mind telling me what’s going on?” He shuffled and got comfortable.

“That’s our question to you.” Kuzuryuu replied, folding his arms over his chest, “What do you remember?”

It was the same question Hajime asked him in the car. Servant sighed loudly, “Your lackey already asked me that.” He pointed to Hajime, “Didn’t he tell you? Or is he that incompetent?”

Kuzuryuu’s eyes widened and he swiftly looked over at Hajime, who was shuffling into the room, looking down. “Lackey? Hajime?” He shook his head, “Never mind that, don’t insult Hajime.” He added.

“Insult?” Servant huffed, “I’m just calling it as I see it… talentless people like him are all worthless in
the end. Merely here to be stepping stones for bigger, better things.”

“Hajime isn’t talentless.” Kuzuryuu snapped before he sat down, staring, “What do you remember? Answer me.”

“Fine, fine, I don’t really remember things, just destroyed cities, despair, death etc. The usual.” Servant added before firing his own question, “Say, did you meet Kamukura?”

Kuzuryuu blinked and turned to Pekoyama and Hajime, staring a bit too long at them before he shook his head, “No, I can’t say I have. Why?”

Interesting… he wasn’t asking who Kamukura was… meaning he knew of him. Servant tucked that information away, “Hajime asked me on the way over here. You both say you haven’t met him, but you seem to know who he is.”

“You’re the same. You know him.” Pekoyama replied.

Servant paused and shot a look at her, “And if I do?”

“Rude… you’ll make me answer, but not tell me anything?” Servant pointed out.

Silence. Servant felt a smile fill his face. Kuzuryuu opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Hajime spoke up. “Fine. We’ll answer one question honestly if you do the same.”

An exchange? That required both parties having a level of trust. Hajime was implying they were hoping he’d be honest. It was almost laughable, but at the same time, curiosity bubbled inside of him. He could judge for himself if they were lying…

“I’m taking your silence as a yes.” Hajime continued, “So, how do you know Kamukura?”

Curiosity won. Servant supposed it wasn’t a bad trade off in the end. Half truths, half answers from everyone… pieces of truth would be exchanged, so something was being gained.

“I met him in Towa City.” Servant replied truthfully. “Now, how do you know Kamukura?”

Pekoyama opened her mouth, Kuzuryuu opened his, but Hajime beat them to it. He squared his shoulders and looked him directly in the eyes. His voice didn’t hesitate, didn’t waver as he replied with a dull, almost factual voice.

“I’m Kamukura…. Sort of.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Hajime watched as Komaeda’s eyes widened before he started laughing. He bent over the table and started to giggle, high, wheezing giggles that stumbled out of his lips. His voice started to crack as he tried to talk, to stop himself from laughing. Hajime’s face burned.

“You’re lying.” He gasped between his giggles.

“He’s not.” Kuzuryuu said for Hajime.

Immediately Komaeda’s laughter stopped, his eyes cold and expression dead, “I thought we had a deal. Here I answered properly and you have the audacity to lie to me.” He scoffed, “Tell me the
truth.”

“We did. Technically.” Kuzuryuu continued.

“It’s a long story.” Pekoyama added.

Komaeda stood up and stared at them, “Fine, lie to me. I got other things I want to ask, like why isn’t the city destroyed?” He sweetly smiled, “You’ll answer this truthfully, yes?”

Hajime thickly swallowed. The opportunity to tell what was going on had never come up. Either someone was out of it, or their episode didn’t last long. Why was Komaeda’s so long? Hajime glanced at Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama. What were they going to say?

“Well?” Komaeda pressed, “Answer me. Or do you need time to come up with your lies? I can step out if you want.” He added.

The skin on his arms pricked and Hajime could feel his muscles tense. Komaeda’s tone was so unlike him, so hostile, and smug. He was only barely cordial to Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama. But towards him… Talent was the only thing that mattered to Komaeda. Hajime felt a lump form in his throat. Just because he knew the reasoning behind his behaviour didn’t make the blow any less hurtful.

“We’re not lying.” Hajime replied, feeling his voice swell with containing his emotions, “We’re just not sure what to tell you. We aren’t sure ourselves, but whatever you remember… it isn’t real here.”

“Isn’t… real…” Komaeda muttered. “Explain.”

“We’ve been dreaming of… whatever you remember.” Hajime quickly said, lest Komaeda suddenly insult him again, “But we got our own lives here. You woke up in a house because it’s your house. The people you saw are your parents, and this world you see is intact because… nothing you remember has happened here.”

Komaeda’s eyes widened and he stepped back, staring at them. His mouth opened a few times before he managed to speak, his voice surprisingly level, “So what is this? An alternate world?”

“We think… reincarnation?” Pekoyama said softly.

“Reincarnation…” Komaeda mused before he collapsed, sitting again, staring at Hajime, “So… if you really are telling the truth, and I’m living a new life here… that’s your explanation to why I woke up with a stranger spooning me in bed?”

Hajime flushed again. Did he have to say it like that?

“I suppose this means we’re together?” Komaeda cocked his head, “A thing?”

“Uh… yes?” Hajime wished it didn’t sound like he was asking a question.

Komaeda laughed, “I wonder what I see in you then.”

Out of everything Komaeda had said to him, that cut deeper than the others, hacking away slowly. Hajime could only stare at Komaeda as he chuckled before suddenly stopping, eyes widening. His body swayed and he nearly fell onto the table as he collapsed onto the tatami mat. Hajime sprung to action, kneeling at his side, gently reaching out, shaking his shoulders.

“Na – Servant?”
Komaeda stirred, eyes opening, rapidly blinking, before he turned and looked. “Hajime?”

“Nagito?” Hajime asked, nearly jumping.

“Where… are we?” He tried to sit up and nearly fell again. Hajime grabbed his shoulder, helping him regain his balance, “Kuzuryuu? Pekoyama?”

“You’re at my house.” Kuzuryuu replied, “I’ll… we need something to drink. Coffee? Tea?”

“Coffee?” Komaeda requested, rubbing his head, “Why are we here?”

“You…” Hajime swallowed, “You weren’t yourself.”

That snapped Komaeda’s attention. He immediately grabbed Hajime, eyes roaming rapidly over him, “I didn’t hurt you, did I? I didn’t hurt… anyone, did I?”

His concern washed over him, easing some of the things he had said earlier, “You didn’t attack anyone.” Hajime told him, “Though you were a bit snarky.”

“Snarky?” Komaeda repeated, “That doesn’t sound good. Was I rude?”

Did Hajime have to answer that? He bit his lip, “Um… sort of… but that’s okay…”

“I was rude to you.” Komaeda cut him off, brow furrowed, “Wasn’t I?”

Hajime shut his jaw so quickly he heard an audible click. Komaeda’s brow furrowed more and he leaned closer, wrapping his arms around Hajime loosely, resting his head on Hajime’s shoulder, bending down.

“I’m sorry for anything I said. I’d like to hear what I said later, if that’s okay with you? I mean… if you want to tell me…” Komaeda floundered, “If you don’t want to repeat it I can ask Kuzuryuu or Pekoyama…”

The warmth of Komaeda’s voice and his body made Hajime smile a bit, shaking his head, “It’s okay… we’ll talk about it later.”

~

Time slipped and Komaeda didn’t move from Hajime’s arms until Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama returned, carrying a tray of coffee and food. At once Hajime’s stomach growled, reminding him he hadn’t eaten breakfast. Komaeda sat up, but kept an arm around Hajime, loose and warm.

“Thank you.” He said.

“It’s no problem.” Kuzuryuu sat down, “What do you remember?”

“I don’t remember much.” Komaeda replied, “Just one moment I was in my bed and the next… I’m lying on your floor. What happened?”

Everyone turned to Hajime. He swallowed and gripped the borrowed pants, clutching the fabric between his fingers. Komaeda reached over and lightly touched his hand. Hajime flinched at the sudden contact, but relaxed into it. Reaching over he let Komaeda lace their fingers together. It was time to explain.

“Basically, Nagito woke me up and wasn’t himself. I phoned you.” Hajime slowly said, “We ran into his parents and he nearly collapsed in the hallway. I convinced them it was fine and after he
recovered we came over here.”

“Did I say anything strange?” Komaeda pressed lightly.

“You were just confused why everything wasn’t in ruins and that chaos wasn’t running rampant here.” Hajime answered.

“I was rude to you too.” Komaeda frowned as he clarified.

“Uh… yes sort of.” Hajime muttered.

“Was I rude to you two too?” Komaeda turned to Pekoyama and Kuzuryuu.

“Not particularly.” Pekoyama truthfully answered, “You wanted to know how we know Kamukura.”

“Kamukura?” Komaeda looked at Hajime.

“I… was asking in the car if you remembered the Program or Kamukura.” Hajime answered, “You knew nothing about the Program, only Kamukura.”

“You also talked about meeting Kamukura in a place called Towa City.” Kuzuryuu added, “We didn’t get anything else.”

“I see…” Komaeda muttered, “But I didn’t hurt anyone… so… I guess that’s a positive?”

“Yes, that is.” Pekoyama firmly agreed, “But this is still alarming. Koizumi… and now you…”

“I…” Komaeda looked down, “I know… have you told everyone else?”

“Not yet.” Kuzuryuu answered, “But we will.”

Komaeda let out a long breath, laboured with the words he wasn’t saying and maybe wanted to say, but couldn’t. “Okay.”

~

The moment they were back in Komaeda’s house, Hajime felt himself being pulled into a long hug, Komaeda burying his face into Hajime’s hair, pressing a light kiss to his temples. Hajime reached and hugged him back, feeling the warmth and pulse of Komaeda in his arms.

“Is it all right to ask what I said to you?” Komaeda muttered into Hajime’s hair.

“It’s fine.” Hajime assured, rubbing his back, “Just… don’t hold yourself accountable for it okay?”

Komaeda let him go and stared into Hajime’s eyes. Hajime stared back, seeing the flecks of grey and blue mixing. “You’re making me nervous. Was it horrible?” Komaeda asked.

“You acted like you did in Trial Four.” Hajime ventured, “Snappy, snarky… you were really focused on talent. When I didn’t answer you if I had a talent, you became quite hostile.”

“I… did?” Komaeda blanched.

“It was the root of the aggression.” Hajime truthfully told him, “Especially when…” He paused.

“When?” Komaeda lightly pressed.
The words, the ones Komaeda last said before he snapped out of it... asking what he saw in him... Hajime tried to not dwell on them, but he could still hear the laughter, ripping slowly into him. But, it wasn’t good to keep it a secret from Komaeda. He... didn’t mean it.

“When you found out we are dating.” Hajime answered, “You asked me what you could possibly see in me…”

Komaeda’s face was so white it looked unhealthy, he stared, lips parted with no sound. Hajime squirmed a bit, reaching out to him, “It’s fine... you didn’t mean it. You weren’t…”

Arms, warm and heavy wrapped around Hajime again. Komaeda pulled him close, tightly, like he was trying to keep Hajime grounded. Their bodies moved towards somewhere to sit, ending up on the couch. The change in angle allowed Komaeda to pull Hajime awkwardly, almost painful, but Hajime couldn’t voice it.

“I... said that?” Komaeda’s voice was barely a whisper, “I...I’m sorry Hajime.”

“It wasn’t…”

Komaeda managed to press a finger to Hajime’s mouth, silencing him. “It does matter. It came from me. In my mouth. Even if you know that wasn’t me... it must have been hard to hear something like that from me. I’m sorry.”

Hajime felt Komaeda’s body shake a bit. He moved, signalling to Komaeda he wanted to sit up. Their embrace loosened and allowed Hajime to look at Komaeda. Colour was returning to his cheeks, but he wasn’t meeting Hajime’s gaze.

“It’s fine. I know.” Hajime leaned closer, “I know it isn’t how you feel.”

“I love you Hajime.” Komaeda lifted his hand and carted his fingers through Hajime’s hair, “Just... if I wake up... not me again... know that whatever rude things I say I don’t mean them.”

Leaning forward, Komaeda softly pressed a kiss to Hajime’s mouth, “Still, sorry you had to hear that.”

Hajime pressed another kiss, “It’s fine... though... maybe we should find your parents? They were worried about you when we left...”

“Okay.” Komaeda agreed, standing up, “Let’s go?” He offered his hand.

Hajime took it.

~

“Hey... is this weekend still good for... the amusement park?” – Sonia

“OH, right I almost forgot about that!” – Hajime

“It’s fine.” – Nagito

“I’m good.” – Nagito

“Okay... sorry I forgot with... all the excitement...” – Sonia

“I’ll text the name and address okay? And is two o’clock okay?” – Sonia
“Yes, that’s perfect.” – Hajime

“We’ll see you there.” – Nagito

~

“Looking better!” Saionji praised before smacking Hajime harshly on the back.

He staggered and wheezed, “Uh… thanks?”

The camera flashed, adding to his pain. White spots danced in his vision for a few seconds as Koizumi took a few pictures, laughing when Saionji bounced over to glance at them. “Wow, great photos as usual Mahiru. You better thank her Hajime!”

“Yeah… thanks…” Hajime blinked the last few spots out of his vision, “For taking the photos.”

“No problem.” Koizumi beamed, “I’m working on making you a scrapbook of these lessons. You’ll see the photos later.”

“Okay.” Hajime smiled, “That’s very thoughtful.”

Koizumi blushed a bit, “It’s not a big deal. Anyways, let’s set these on the side to dry.” She started to transfer Hajime’s work onto a board with sheets of old newspaper lining it. “I got a plate of food, bring it to the table.”

Hajime nodded and walked into their kitchen, grabbing the plate. It was filled with sweets and home baking. Bringing it back, he set it on the newly cleared table. Saionji brushed past him and soon there was tea, warm and green, in front of Hajime.

“Thank you.” Hajime nibbled on a cookie, “Wow, this is amazing.”

“I made those yesterday.” Koizumi told him, picking one up for herself. “I made too much though. You can take some home if you like.”

“I will.” Hajime agreed, “So… how have… things been?” Was it okay to ask this question? The obvious hung in the air, threatening to fall upon them.

“So much practice.” Saionji moaned gracefully, “I got a show at that same event Pekoyama’s doing in April… they want me to do a variety of performances. I got three dances to learn…”

“Wow.” Hajime stared, “That’s a lot…”

“Yeah… so far, it’s just choreography, me testing what works for each song. I’m going to keep each dance short, that way I can cycle through each a few times.” Saionji sighed.

“And photography assignments are kicking my butt.” Koizumi told him, “Say, do you mind if I use some of the photos I took today for one of my projects?”

“Go for it.” Hajime encouraged, sipping his tea.

“Thanks.” Koizumi ate her cookie before her expression changed, “So… uh… we were talking.”

Hajime felt the air shift, turning a bit cold. Koizumi wasn’t looking at him, but rather at Saionji, who was doing (at least what Hajime could guess) her best impression of a round cactus trying to blend into it’s surroundings and failing miserably. Her hands were wrapped in her kimono, curling around the silk, relaxing and tensing.
“We… heard about Komaeda.” Saionji looked at her lap as she spoke.

Oh. Right. Hajime had forgotten Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama were telling everyone. Apparently, it was a conversation he did individually and not in the group chat.

“And we just wanted to say… if you or Komaeda need someone to talk to… you know… um… we are here and… stuff…” Saionji continued.

Some warmth returned to the kitchen. Hajime felt his mouth widen into a silly smile, his heart full of light as Saionji’s open invitation registered in his mind. Without thinking, Hajime reached over and hugged her, pulling Koizumi into their hug awkwardly. They both squeaked, though Koizumi’s sounded more dignified.

“Yeah… I mean… if you want to talk to us…” Koizumi added, her cheeks pink, “It’s just an idea…”

“No, no it’s great. Thank you. This means a lot to me… to us.” Hajime told her.

“Great.” Saionji half head-butted Hajime’s chest and arm, “You can let go of us… no need to be mushy and crap…”

Hajime laughed and let go of her, not commenting on the pink also dusting her cheeks.


Thankfully the sun was out and the wind down. Hajime wrapped his scarf around his neck and checked the time. It was almost two. The amusement park was well shoved, and a bit further south, getting warmer weather. The place was bustling modestly, with people consistently coming in and coming out. Cheerful music played in the background, but wasn’t on a constant mission to cause ear aches.

“They’ll be here any moment now.” Komaeda softly said beside him, “This is nice. We’ve never done an amusement park date.”

A date. It was enough to make Hajime smile and briefly tune out the recent events, “Well if we like this place, we can always return for another time.”

“Are you asking me out on a date while we are in the process of starting one?” Komaeda asked with a smile, “Because the answer is always yes.”

“You’re so…”

“Hajime! Komaeda!”

Sonia’s voice rang clearly in the air. She jogged towards them, Tanaka silently trailing behind her. There was a brightness to her eyes, a lift in her step. She stopped in front of them and reached into her purse, pulling out four tickets.

“How are you? Were you waiting long?” She asked.

“No, not at all. Maybe a few minutes.” Komaeda replied before turning to Tanaka, “Hello Tanaka.”

“Greetings Komaeda, Hinata. I trust all has been smooth in your lives?”

Funny he should word it like that. Hajime tried to not glance at Komaeda or wonder what expression he was making, “It’s been fine. Had a few long days. Nothing new.”
Tanaka hummed, “I sense fatigue clinging to your spirit.”

He reached into his long black jacket and pulled out two business cards, handing them over. Hajime stared at the card. The title read “Soothing Springs”. It took Hajime an embarrassing long time to connect the dots.

“A… massage place?”

“No just any massage place.” Tanaka seriously said, “But a therapeutic oasis in the middle of the turmoil and strife of life. Here, you will experience a weightless bliss we all hope and dream rapture will be like once we experience it.”

“His mother owns the place.” Sonia added.

Oh. Hajime flushed, “Thank you Tanaka.” He pocketed the card.

“If arrive at the tail end of the week I’ll be there assisting and can allow you the chance to save your hard-earned funds.” Tanaka said.

“You work at your mother’s business?” Komaeda asked, “That’s wonderful.”

“They have a section for pet grooming and pampering.” Sonia once again added on.

That made sense. Hajime eyed Tanaka’s jacket and wondered if his hamsters were there, though he wasn’t about to ask. “Thank you. We’ll visit soon. Now, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s go!” Sonia cheered, leading them to the ticket counter.

After exchanging their tickets for passes, they entered the park. At once he was hit with the smell of food, popcorn, cotton candy, hot dogs… the music also got a bit louder, though it wasn’t too bad. Vendors were everywhere, selling not just food, but balloons, and gifts. Some of the stands were game stands, like festivals had and shops were sprinkled around.

“Now, where to go first?” Sonia asked, opening a map. “Oh… they got this!” She pointed to the illustration.

Hajime looked over, “The Wind Tunnel?”

“It’s a rollercoaster!” Sonia exclaimed happily. “Can we go there first? It’s close to us.”

“Sure?” Hajime looked over. Komaeda was smiling, but Tanaka looked a bit green.

“That’s fine.” Komaeda replied.

“If… you insist…” Tanaka muttered.

The Wind Tunnel turned out to be a massive rollercoaster that went so fast and had so many loops in a row, it felt like a hurricane twisting and pulling them around. Wind blew past them at high speeds, and Hajime let out a long yell of pure joy as adrenaline rushed through his body. When the ride ended it felt too soon. He staggered out with Komaeda holding onto his arm, laughing. Sonia followed, smiles and cheer. Only Tanaka staggered, nearly falling to the ground, eyes wide.

“I’ve… seen many strange, peculiar things in my time on this planet… but never such…evil…” He muttered.

“Are you all right Gundham?” Sonia rushed to his side, arm around his shoulder, “Do you want
something to drink?”

“P-Perhaps…. Water…” He gasped.

“Right.” Hajime started to walk, “I’ll go get that.”

He walked to the closest vendor and bought a bottle of water. Upon returning he noticed they had moved to a bench. Handing the water over, Hajime watched, a bit in awe, as Tanaka gulped half of the water immediately.

“My thanks Hinata.” He twisted the cap on and stood up, “Perhaps we should venture to a different attraction?”

“Okay.” Hajime agreed, beginning to walk, “Where should we go?”

“I want to see this.” Komaeda pointed to a place on Sonia’s map.

“Dare I ask what that is?” Hajime asked.

“A haunted house.” Komaeda replied.

“A… haunted house?” Hajime stared.

“I’m hoping you’ll be scared enough to cling to me.” Komaeda seriously answered.

Sonia laughed, but Tanaka looked thoughtful, “A haunted house you say? Very well. Let’s see what their haunted establishment has to offer.”

The haunted house had the environment right, with decaying lawns, a stone entrance that looked like it led under the house, rather than through the front. Following the group, Hajime stared at the dimly lit passage with torches and lanterns.

“Looks terrifying.” Hajime muttered.

“Nonsense.” Tanaka proclaimed beside Hajime, “I’ve seen terror.” He paused, “And heard it.”

“Heard it?” Hajime asked.

Tanaka nodded, “In the form of the she-devil, clad in darks and neon. She protects herself with spikes and a cheery personality, but I’m not fooled. The sounds she can produce are like tortured souls stuck in hell. The sound will resonate within your very bones and muscles for weeks afterwards.”

Hajime blinked, “That sounds… interesting?”

“Apparently it is… to many people on this planet. Truly, there are still some strange things we still cannot understand.”

“Hey, we’re ready to go!” Sonia popped beside them, “Let’s venture onwards into the dark depths!”

Tanaka chuckled darkly, “It seems my lady is fearless of the unknown.”

“Right you are!” Sonia linked her arm with his and Hajime’s “Let’s go!”

To Hajime’s utter chagrin, he ended up clinging to Sonia and Komaeda as they went through the haunted house. Their guide was amazing and all the rooms, sets, and actors put on a good
performance. Beside him he heard Tanaka whistle a few times at the sets and Sonia looked utterly thrilled.

When they left the house, it was Hajime’s turn to wobble towards a bench, plopping down with a heavy sigh. Komaeda sat beside him, stroking his hair. “That was fun.” He chimed.

“It was… though my heart didn’t need this kind of excitement.” Hajime muttered.

“Do you need a longer rest?” Komaeda asked.

“No… I’m fine.” Hajime stood up, “Where to next?”

“Let’s check with Sonia.” Komaeda pulled them over to her. “Hey Sonia, can we see the map?”

“Sure,” She opened it, “Let’s see… they got some games if we want to do those… oh and another rollercoaster!” She pointed eagerly, “They also got a Ferris Wheel, merry go round…”

“They also have a Funhouse.” Tanaka pointed out.

Hajime felt a tingle run through his arms and in his legs. Did Tanaka suggest a… Funhouse? He looked at him, but Tanaka was staring at the map. That… was a coincidence… right? Though to have Funhouses connected to him for the second time… maybe they should go… see if he reacted.

“Yes, why don’t we do the Funhouse?” Hajime asked. “It’s close to here.”

Sonia and Komaeda shot him a look, but Hajime focused on Tanaka, seeing if he’d react. Tanaka merely grinned and pointed outward, “Let’s be off then! I believe the Funhouse lies in this direction.”

They walked, Komaeda and Sonia trailing closer to Hajime, letting Tanaka take the lead. Hajime felt their hands on his arms as both leaned in, voices low.

“You sure this is a good idea Hajime?” Komaeda asked, “I mean my last memory of a Funhouse isn’t… good.”

“Do you think Gundham will react to it?” Sonia inquired.

“I think we won’t know unless we try.” Hajime managed to answer both at the same time.

The Funhouse wasn’t bright or a strange shape, making the separation from their dreams easier. Hajime stared. Most amusement park Funhouses were strange mazes, maybe filled with mirrors that distorted their appearance and shape. Most Funhouses didn’t have strange elevators, impossible architecture, and a room only accessible by playing Russian Roulette. Entering made it easier. The place was brightly lit, with various paths to choose. Hajime stared. Should they split up or stay together?

“Let’s stick together.” Sonia announced, “Which door should we go through?”

“This one.” Komaeda pointed to the one on the furthest right.

“Okay.” Sonia nodded.

On the other side, was a hallway, winding and twisting. There were doors on the sides, some with windows clearly showing the interiors. Some were offices, others spacious rooms with nothing inside, and some with no windows at all. The path lead to a large circular room with mirrors all around and an exit at the furthest point from the entrance. Hajime’s heart stopped and suddenly his stomach was tying into firm knots. This felt… familiar… with less saturated colours…
Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.

“I… I think we should leave.” Sonia voiced his thoughts.

Hajime looked back, “We can walk to the beginning… or try the exit.”

“The exit is closer.” Komaeda said, “Let’s try that.”

He walked over and tried to open the door, but it didn’t budge. Hajime felt the air squeeze out of his lungs. Was it locked? Or was it… fake? He rushed over and tried it. The door didn’t move, no sign of motion. He tried again, harder this time.

“It’s locked.” Hajime announced, feeling a cold and hot sensation fill his body, “Or a fake exit.”

“We… should go back.” Sonia turned.

Tanaka stared at them, but Hajime didn’t have the energy to explain. The urge, the tickling sensation at the back of his mind took over. They walked, rather quickly, back to the door they entered. Sonia reached for the handle, but it didn’t budge. The sensation stopped being cold and ran hot, hot enough to burn the tips of Hajime’s ears and his insides.

“There… has to be an exit…” Hajime glanced around, “Maybe if we try one of the side rooms?”

“I tested some of the doors already.” Komaeda said, “They either opened to enclosed rooms, or didn’t budge at all.”

That… wasn’t good news. Hajime slowly exhaled, “Is there any other way out?”

“I… don’t know…” Sonia muttered, “But there has to be.”

“… if I may have permission to speak.” Tanaka suddenly said, “But Funhouses are meant to be puzzles too, yes? Illusions and tricks played on the mind to distract from what is in front of them, yes?”

Hajime looked at him.

“Let’s return to the circular room.” Tanaka said.

Did they have another option? Hajime followed, staring at the mirrored room a moment before walking back inside. Tanaka headed over to the door and pointed to the bottom of the door. There, at foot height, was a bright button, one they could press with their foot. How Hajime had missed it… he wasn’t sure.

“You missed it upon your first viewing.” Tanaka proceeded to press his foot to the button, “I believe if we press this and at the same time…” He turned the door’s handle. It opened. “There, puzzle solved.”

The room beyond the door was tiled, many different colours. On the wall was a set of instructions, showing different colours in progression. Hajime felt a strong wave of relief hit him. They weren’t trapped… it was just… them missing the puzzles. Hajime felt another strong wave of relief hit him. They weren’t trapped. They weren’t going to starve to death. It was thanks to Tanaka for noticing the button on the door.

“Thank you, Tanaka. You… saved us.”

“You’re most welcome Hinata.” Tanaka replied, “I won’t let us be trapped in another Funhouse.”
A pin could have dropped in the room and they would have heard. Tanaka stared at him, Hajime stared back. Did he… say what Hajime thought he said?

“Did… you?” Hajime tried to speak his thoughts.

Sonia cut him off, stumbling to Tanaka, grabbing his hands, “You… remember?” She gasped out.

Tanaka blinked, “Does this mean… you too… have had the visions…?”

That was good enough confirmation for Sonia. She launched herself at him, hugging tightly. The speed they left the Funhouse blurred in Hajime’s mind. Sonia was babbling, questions, questions that seemed more for Sonia to get them out of her system, rather than be answered. Tanaka swayed under the weight of her questions. Sometimes, he answered, but most of the time, he just listened.

~

“Tanaka remembers?” – Fuyuhiko

“Yes! He does!” – Sonia

“We can have a group meeting later, when we’re all free.” – Sonia

“Sounds like a plan. What does he remember?” – Pekoyama

“Oh, hell yeah girl! Your boy remembers! Let’s celebrate!” – Akane

“Akane! Not now!” – Mahiru

“Though that’s wonderful news he remembers.” – Mahiru

“If… you could answer Pekoyama please?” – Mitarai

“Right, he remembers being trapped in the Funhouse. We learnt that at the amusement park.” – Sonia

“Yeah, we were in the Funhouse.” – Nagito

“You went on a double date and didn’t invite me?” – Hanamura

“Next time let me go with you. For research purposes.” – Hanamura

“Ew, what does that even mean?? Sounds gross.” – Hiyoko

“Never mind that. Let’s schedule a meeting time.” – Kuzuryuu

“Really? This feels so repetitive…” – Saionji

“I got practices…” – Saionji

“It doesn’t have to be all of us at once. We could take turns.” – Souda

“Sure. Regardless, tell me when you’re free.” – Kuzuryuu

~

Souda had surprisingly few boxes and bags. Hajime helped him carry everything into the room. There was no bed, but Hajime had a plush futon folded in the corner. It still made the room look
sparse. Hajime had never noticed when he had his painting stuff cluttering the room, but now… it was sad. He’d have to fix that for Souda.

“Sorry there isn’t a lot here.” Hajime said, “We can go shopping later and find things for you.”

“Right.” Souda nodded, “But this is fine for now. Is Komaeda going to join us?”

“Yeah, the more help, the better.” Hajime replied.

“Sounds good.” Souda opened a box, “I’m really grateful you’re giving this a shot.”

“It’s no problem Kazuichi.” Hajime walked over to the closet, opening it. “If there isn’t enough space here, we can always buy a small dresser later.”

“Okay.” Souda nodded, “Let’s unpack my crap.”

~

By the time Komaeda arrived most of the stuff was unpacked, Hajime and Souda moving empty cardboard boxes into the storage, or rather, trying to. Hajime rubbed his head. He would have to rearrange some of his paintings… there wasn’t enough space… though maybe he could stuff a few of his smaller ones into the boxes?

“Playing Tetris?” Komaeda asked.

Souda nearly jumped, smacking his head on the cramped space, “How did you get in here?”

“I walked through the front door?” Komaeda asked, raising an eyebrow, “Hajime left it unlocked.”

“Oh…” Souda rubbed his head, “I see… you two have developed to that stage of a relationship, huh?” He wiggled his eyebrows, “Next thing you know you’ll be giving keys to each other’s houses.”

Hajime flushed, “Kazuichi!”

“You know it’s true.” Souda protested, “Just… if we’re on the topic, can we lay down some ground rules? Like I love you two a lot, but there are things I don’t want to witness…”

“Kazuichi!!” Hajime gaped, “We… wouldn’t…”

“You never know.” Souda firmly said, “It’s good to get this topic out of the way…” He stumbled, “Hey don’t try to elbow me, you know I’m right Hajime!”

Chapter End Notes

Auburn Hair: I'm sticking to the headcanon that Nagito's hair was an auburn like colour before he got sick and it turned white. While I know sometimes it looks like it's hinted when we see him in colour, but since it's never been confirmed (as far as I know) I'm sticking to it as a headcanon.

The Wind Tunnel: Let it be known I'm crap at naming things. I picked a random one. If there is a ride out there with this name... that's a coincidence and I'm sorry.
Fun House: I... honestly have no clue exactly what a Fun House... is... so I made it a sort of place with puzzles and stuff to solve to move through it. Also I was envisioning The Stanley Parable as I wrote the scene.
Love, Love, Hospitals

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry this took so long.

Steam Summer sale didn't necessarily kick my writing time to the curb, but what did was Ultra Despair Girls being released on Steam. I bought it and played whenever I could. I have finished it, so now it's just me running around completing things, getting achievements... etc.

This chapter did a lot of things I didn't expect to happen, but I'm happy with it. I had a lot of fun writing (when I finally had the motivation to do so).

I hope you enjoy this chapter. Thank you to everyone who take the time to write comments or leave kudos. It means a lot to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything was set as neatly as they could with the minimal furniture Hajime had around. A heater sat in the corner of the room, small but powerful. Hajime helped Souda set up the futon, making sure he was as close to the heater as possible. Komaeda was moving some empty boxes into the storage. Hajime was certain without his help they wouldn’t have finished everything as quickly as they did.

“Here.” Hajime tossed the pillow, “We can get you a proper bed later.”

Souda shrugged, “I’m used to a futon. There is no rush.”

“Oh… okay.” Hajime blinked, “Come to think of it, I’ve never seen your house or your place before.”

“They’re nothing special.” Souda assured, “I’ve never really had people over, even when I was in Elementary school.”

“Hey,” Komaeda walked in before Hajime could answer, “Hey, are you two hungry?”

Souda immediately perked up, “Yeah, I am! Let’s order pizza! My treat!”

“Are you sure?” Hajime asked, “We can pay…”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Souda shook his head, “It's my way of saying thanks for all you're doing for me.”

“Okay.” Komaeda sat down, “I like pepperoni.”

“What about you Hajime?” Souda wrinkled his nose, “Have we even eaten pizza together?”

“I'm good with whatever.” Hajime waved his hand.

“Ah, and here I thought we’d get into the pineapple discourse.” Souda laughed, “Pepperoni it is! Oh, can we add mushrooms too?”
“Knock yourself out.” Hajime muttered.

Souda pulled his laptop out and silently did the order, gasping as he finished, “Wow, it says it will deliver in fifteen to twenty minutes. It takes forever to get to my place. I’m staying here permanently.”

“Wow that was faster than expected.” Hajime poked him, “I’ll add that as a selling point.”

“You’ll get all sorts of offers.” Komaeda ruffled Hajime’s hair, “Anyways, as we’re waiting, let’s get something to drink?”

Souda cheered, “Oh yeah! Say, you got any beer? I think I deserve some after all this hard work.”

“No, sorry.” Hajime stood up, “I’m not the biggest fan of beer, but we can buy some later.”

“I brought a bottle of wine.” Komaeda piped up.

“You brought… wine?” Souda blinked.

“I thought it could be a… house warming gift? For you?” Komaeda asked Souda, “Though maybe I should have asked what you like to drink?”

“No, no, wine is fine.” Souda assured, “Thanks Komaeda. That’s thoughtful.”

“I’ll get the glasses.” Hajime stood up, “Will you have some Nagito?”

“I don’t know, will you let me stay the night?” Komaeda sweetly asked.

“As long as you two keep it down. It’s my first night here, give me a break.” Souda called out.

“You…” Hajime sighed, “We’re not bringing that up now.”

“Why not?” Souda bounce to his feet, “We haven’t laid down any ground rules yet…”

Hajime lifted his hand lightly pushing Souda, “Later. And yes, you can stay the night.”

“Great.” Komaeda said, “I’ll open the bottle.”

Hajime followed him to the kitchen and opened the cabinet, pulling out the glasses. Souda followed, hovering at the counter, watching Komaeda open the bottle. When the door bell rang, they all jumped. Souda immediately went to the door, wallet in hand. He returned a moment later with two boxes of pizza.

“Should we eat in… here?” Souda slowly asked.

“Sure,” Hajime pointed to the small table in the corner, “We’ll bring the wine over.”

Souda went to the table and Komaeda handed Hajime his glass. Taking one over to Souda, they all sat down, Souda opening one of the boxes. The smell of greasy fast food filled the kitchen warmly. Hajime made a mental note to leave the boxes outside the backdoor less the house smell like pizza for the next while.

“Thank you for the pizza.” Komaeda pulled a slice.

“No problem.” Souda took a slice and bit in, “Ugh this is the best. Nothing beats pizza after a hard day of work.”
Hajime sipped the wine Komaeda brought. It wasn’t overly sweet, but not too dry. “I can’t remember
the last time I had pizza.”

“We’ll have to make a point of eating some a little more often then.” Souda vowed, already finishing
his first slice.

Hajime laughed and picked up his first slice, biting in, “This is good.”

“Yeah,” Souda nodded, “I like this place. Their dough isn’t as… doughy as other places.” He tilted
his head, “Also they got a variety of toppings and sauces. Oh, can we try a cream sauce with
shrimp?”

“A what now?” Hajime asked, “I didn’t realize pizza had so many… varieties?”

“It sure does!” Souda puffed up, “I’ll have to introduce you to the world of pizza.”

The… world of pizza? Hajime blinked, “Uh… okay? Sounds good?”

“This is so exciting!” Souda beamed, “We can do roommate stuff! Like go to movies together! And
grocery shop together! Oh, and stay up late talking to each other.”

A warm fuzzy glow filled Hajime’s heart. Those sounded lovely, small moment he wouldn’t share
with many people, but moments he would gladly share with Souda. Beside him Komaeda smiled and
leaned into Hajime, lazily swirling his glass of wine. This was perfect, a moment Hajime wished to
keep. Pulling his phone out he hit his camera app.

“Picture. Let’s take one.” He said, flipping the camera.

Souda stood up and walked over, kneeling close to Hajime. Komaeda leaned closer. Hajime made
sure the picture was in focus before he took the shot.

~

“That was fun.” Komaeda hummed, lazily trailing his finger around Hajime’s arm, dipping into the
crease of his elbow. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

“No problem.” Hajime replied, “You brought the wine anyways. It would be rude to not let you try
some.”

“Thanks sweetie.” Komaeda snuggled, “Though I think we got another bottle somewhere…”

Hajime wrapped his arm around Komaeda, pulling him closer, cutting him off. Komaeda wrapped
his arm around Hajime’s shoulders loosely, breathing warmly into his neck. His legs tangled with
Hajime’s, sharing his warmth in the already heat losing room. It was perfect. The wine buzzed
pleasantly in Hajime’s veins, not too much, but enough to keep a warm floaty feeling as he fell
asleep.

~

Living with Souda seamlessly flowed into Hajime’s life, weaving subtle changes. Slowly Souda’s
possessions migrated to the house, first contained neatly in his room, but then spilt out all over. A
wrench lying on the table, a few mechanical books on the couch, a mug identical to the one Souda
made him all those years ago in the sink… they all became ordinary sights for Hajime.

Their schedules worked well together, Souda’s classes ending mainly before lunch with labs and
practical work in the afternoon, plus the occasional work shift in the evening. It left them surprisingly free most evenings to see each other. Meal times became a silent agreement, always eating with each other, chatting about their days.

“Ugh, lab was brutal today.” Souda flopped into his designated chair, “My lab partners knew shit all.”

“That sounds harsh.” Hajime winced, “Would you like some coffee?”

“You are a saviour.” Souda nodded.

“I try.” Hajime grabbed a mug and poured the coffee, “What happened at lab?”

“It was more like a group problem solving project than practical work.” Souda replied, “But they just… most of them just wanted to talk about their weekends. And when we were focused their answers were just…”

“Here.” Hajime pushed the coffee over, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s fine now.” Souda muttered, bringing the mug to his lips, “How was your day?”

“Free.” Hajime replied, “My class was cancelled so I just went over and painted in the free room.”

Souda bit his lip, “Do you want to set up a new place to paint now that I took the free room?”

“Oh, it’s not that.” Hajime quickly replied, “I had the work at school already. Plus, it was oil paint and that smells.” He looked around, “But I can always paint in the living room… so long as I’m mindful of the couches.”

“All right.” Souda drained his mug before his phone went off, “Huh?” He pulled it out, “It’s a message from Sonia. She’s asking when we’re good for a meeting.”

“With Tanaka, huh?” Hajime mused, “Well, I suppose the sooner the better.”

“Right-o.” Souda turned to the fridge, staring at their calendar, “I’ll text her back. You know, I sort of forgot about this. I wonder what he remembers… when he started to remember…”

The questions they were all wondering. Hajime stared into his own mug. Questions that would have to wait.

“Well, he has to remember the Funhouse.” Souda mused, “That’s how we learnt he remembered in the first place. Which, I don’t know why you’d ever agree to go inside one.”

Hajime winced, “It was… not the best choice… I think I’ll stay away from those for a while.”

“Good call.” Souda lifted his mug, “Thanks for the coffee Hajime. I better get ready for work…” He grimaced, “But I’ll let you know what Sonia says.”

“Okay, thanks.”

~

Hanamura hummed and bustled about, setting out snacks and drinks. Despite the diner closed and their group the only ones there, Hajime couldn’t stop a shiver running down his spine. Meeting in public places felt a little jarring. He rubbed his arm and shuffled in his seat. Sonia and Tanaka sat across from everyone, making it feel like a panel for an interview. An over stuffed interview with too
“Hiyoko is still practicing.” Koizumi announced as she sat down, “She won’t make it tonight.”

“Same with Mikan.” Mitarai said, “She’s working the night shift.”

“We can fill them in later.” Sonia graciously said, “Shall we start?” No one contradicted it, so Sonia began, “This is Tanaka Gundham.”

“Greetings.” He waved, “I’ve been informed by Sonia everyone here has witnessed the visions.”

“That’s correct.” Pekoyama said barely batting an eyelash.

“And that you’ve been gathering and seeking those who also have witnessed them, correct?”

“How much do you remember?” Owari leaned into the table to swipe a snack, “And when did you start remembering?”

“The visions began after our encounter during the winter season.” Tanaka answered, “At first the dreams were spontaneous, flares in the night lasting a moment, but recently they’ve grown in number.”

That long ago? Hajime stared. If he had started almost two months ago… why was this the first time any of them heard about it? Especially Sonia, who had spent the most time with him. At his side, he felt Souda stir and move to speak.

“If that’s the case,” Souda started, “Why wait to tell us?”

Tanaka looked down, a bit of pink tinting his cheeks. His free hand migrated to his scarf, to tug it up a bit. “I… had exclusive dreams…”

Hajime tried to not look at Komaeda, but his gaze slowly snapped over. Exclusive dreams… was Tanaka implying he only dreamt of Sonia? And that perhaps the dreams were a bit… intimate? Sinking a bit into his seat, Hajime hoped no one else connected the dots and brought up his sketchbook.

“Oho, exclusive dreams?” Hanamura popped up from the side, “Do these exclusive dreams have to do with our lovely Ms. Sonia?”

There went his wish. Hajime watched as Sonia flushed a bit. Owari looked like she was considering throwing something at him in Sonia’s name, while Kuzuryuu sighed and muttered under his breath. Tanaka, on the other hand, looked up at Hanamura, staring and gaping.

“How do…?” He swallowed, “Do you perhaps possess the All-Seeing Eye? Or perhaps some other form of mind reading?”

All-Seeing what now? Mind reading? Koizumi coughed loudly, followed by Komaeda. Owari was lifting one of the empty bowls, staring at Hanamura. Kuzuryuu had his hands on his head while Souda just sat, gaping.

“Oh no, no nothing like that.” Hanamura said with relish, “I just have… intuition.”

“Mere intuition cannot pierce the barriers in my mind.” Tanaka shook his head, “We’ll have to discuss this power you possess…”

“Err… back on track… if you will.” Mitarai cut in, “The dreams began in December after you met
us. Do you remember everyone here?"

“I…” Tanaka stared at everyone, “I remember only a select few of you mortals.” He gestured loosely, “The ones trapped in the Funhouse are crystal in my mind, as clear as an untouched pond.”

That was what they expected. Hajime waited. Tanaka paused before continuing, “Everything else is murky, except for pieces of memory surrounding the hospital…” He bit his lip, “And a hellish rollercoaster that nearly cost me my life as exchange for riding it.”

Hellish rollercoaster? Hajime’s mind flashed to their amusement park experience. It made sense he supposed. Shaking his head, he focused. So, Tanaka remembered mid way through the timeline. It was a large gap, but they’d work with it. Without prompting, Hajime pulled his sketchbook out, setting it on the table.

“Then, let’s explain everything we know.” Hajime opened the book, “We’ll do introductions as we go?” Everyone nodded, “Almost everyone is here, except for two. We only know their names, Nidai Nekomaru and Mioda…”

Tanaka suddenly stood up, staring at them, looking a bit pale, “Do you perchance mean Mioda Ibuki?”

The silence was staggering and lasted a long beat before everyone whipped their gazes at him, varying degrees of surprise painted on their faces.

“You… know this Mioda Ibuki?” Koizumi stared.

“Like, in this life and not in the dreams?” Owari pressed.

“Where is she?” Komaeda simply asked.

Composing himself, Tanaka sat back down, “Mioda Ibuki is a cheerful she-devil of music. Her personality is like a dark chocolate coated in a pastel layer of candy. The bright, cheerful persona hides her true nature.”

“True nature?” Kuzuryuu blinked, “Please don’t tell me she’s a criminal or something.” He paused, “Not that it would be a problem.” He mildly added.

Hajime wanted to tell him that yes, it would be a problem, but he waited for Tanaka to continue.

“She produces hellish sounds, the wails of the undead echo in her lips and at her finger tips when she wields her electric instrument of destruction.” Tanaka continued, “The floor quakes and moans and threatens to split, releasing Judgement and the Apocalypse upon the world, shaking the foundations.”

Oh. Hajime’s mind flashed to the amusement park, “You mentioned her when we were at the amusement park. So, she’s a musician?”

“Mioda is the conductor to hell, the mouth piece and Harold of Death.” Tanaka firmly said.

“How do you know her?” Souda asked.

“Our paths crossed when we were but fledglings in the world. My mother has a lasting connection with Mioda’s mother. We were oft paired together to learn the art of making acquaintances and socializing.”

“… you knew her since you were young then.” Mitarai summed up simply. “Are you still in touch
with her?”

Tanaka shook his head, “Our communications have ceased since the end of the hellish institution they call high school. Last I’ve heard, she’s travelling the world, spreading her hellish notes to the deprived souls who enjoy it.”

Darn. There went a lead… but at least they had an idea to where Mioda was. Hajime started to write a note down, but Sonia gasped, smacking the table rather loudly. Hanamura jumped and stared at her hand, wringing his hands.

“Sorry!” Sonia squeaked, “It’s just… I knew the name was familiar. Remember my cousin’s wedding?”

“Uh… yes!” Hajime slowly answered, “Last year, was it?”

“Mioda performed at banquet!” Sonia proudly said, “That’s why I knew the name!” She beamed.

Tanaka grasped Sonia’s hand, “You… are very strong… to withstand a performance from the she-devil. The power you possess is uncanny.”

Sonia flushed and proudly puffed her chest, “My cousin really likes her music, so maybe… she’s following what Mioda is doing? I could ask her!”

“Good idea.” Pekoyama firmly said, “We’ll leave it to you.” She turned to Hajime, “Now, let’s start?”

Back on track. Hajime nodded and without further prompting, began to tell the familiar tale.

~

Dodging a kick from Pekoyama, Hajime managed to raise his arms in a block before she smoothly went at him again, nearly punching him in the stomach. He quickly backed up and stared at the wooden knife in her other hand. Biting his lip, he tried to circle around her, to get to the knife, but Pekoyama kept a tight defense, easily dodging his attempts. Sweat poured on his forehead and Hajime resisted the urge to wipe it away. Any opening and Pekoyama would have him on the floor in a hold.

“You’re thinking too hard Hajime.” Pekoyama chastised.

“Sorry.”

Hajime snapped his attention back and tried to remember what Pekoyama had said about knives. He needed to get close, stay behind her, not let her have the space to move and stab him. If he caught her off guard… Hajime ran around the room, making a loop. Pekoyama followed him slowly, turning, giving him a small advantage. Making a dash for it, Hajime ducked under her and tried to grab her arm, allowing him to pull himself around, keeping her arm locked.

Well, in theory.

Pekoyama immediately kicked back, aiming for his knees. Hajime gasped and toppled to the ground, hitting it harshly. A white spot danced in his vision as he felt Pekoyama effectively pin him to the ground, wooden knife at his throat.

“Y-you win.” Hajime gasped.
“That was a good idea.” Pekoyama said, getting off him, “Good idea to keep moving, never stay still. Also trying to lock my arm is good too. But remember, people have legs. Don’t focus on the weapon so much you forget they have other options.”

“Right.” Hajime sat up, rubbing his head. “Noted. Can we try again?”

“Sure, but first, let’s see how Kazuichi and Fuyuhiko are doing.” Pekoyama offered a hand, “How’s the head?”

“A bit sore, but nothing too bad.” Hajime accepted and stood up.

They walked to the next room, Pekoyama opening the door in time to hear Souda’s cry of pain as Kuzuryuu took him down, giving a smug smile as he did so. Hajime winced for Souda and walked over to them.

“Oh hey, we were just finishing.” Kuzuryuu greeted, tugging at his collar.

“You didn’t change out of a suit?” Hajime stared.

“I’d most likely be attacked while wearing one…” Kuzuryuu shrugged, “You all right there Kazuichi? Don’t stay on the ground forever.”

“Ugh… that… I see stars…” Souda groaned, “You’re brutal.”

“Part of my life.” Kuzuryuu sat down beside him, “You two are finished as well?”

“Taking a break.” Hajime replied, “I want to try again.”

“Good luck.” Souda rolled over, stretching, “I want to be conscious thanks.” He paused, “Though if you aren’t well enough to drive home after, I can.”

“Thanks for the concern.” Hajime poked his side, “I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know… Peko will beat you to the ground.” Souda hummed, finally sitting up.

Hajime poked his side again a bit harder. Souda gasped and pouted. “It’s true…”

Pekoyama coughed, “So, I’ve been meaning to ask, how was the moving? Sorry we couldn’t help.”

“It’s fine!” Souda swirled around, “We had Komaeda helping too! It went smoothly and it’s been great! You should visit us.”

“Yeah,” Hajime agreed, “I don’t think I’ve had you inside our place before.”

“We’d love that.” Kuzuryuu said.

“Of course, we’ll have to wait until I’m settled in a bit…” Souda mused, “Still got furniture to buy… and my place to put up for sale…”

“If you need help I can help you.” Hajime reminded him, “First, I think we can worry about furniture. You still need a proper bed and desk.”

“Oh, we can go shopping and get one of those assemble yourself desks!” Souda beamed.

“Those?” Hajime blinked, “The instructions always confuse me…”
“Never fear roomie!” Souda wrapped an arm around Hajime, “I’m the master mechanic! I can put anything together! No desk can stop me!”

“Your superpower no doubt.” Kuzuryuu muttered, “Say I think this break is long enough. If you want to get another few rounds in before dinner, you best hurry up.”

“Dinner?” Hajime asked.

“Yes, dinner. Our chef won’t tolerate lateness to meals.” Kuzuryuu pointed at them, “Got it?”

“Of course, Fuyuhiko.” Pekoyama said with grace, “We shall be quick.”

Hajime tried to protest, but saw a glare dance over Kuzuryuu’s face. He froze and decided… resignation was the best route to take.

~

Tsumiki had left him a text message wall. Hajime blinked and rubbed his eyes, staring at the screen, forcing his vision to focus on the harsh LED light. Her words blurred in his mind, but he could sleepily pick out her words. Something about a giant rocket arm… flying in the sky… not able to… breathe.

Oh. Hajime felt a jolt run through his body, a chill seeping into his bones. This… was her execution. His stomach dropped as he fumbled with his phone, hitting the call button. The tone rang for a while, each tone driving a nail into his stomach. On the millionth ring, it picked up.

“Hello?” Mitarai answered.

“Mitarai?” Hajime’s voice was softer than he wanted it to be.

“Hinata.” They greeted, “I assume you read Mikan’s text messages? I sent those for her.”

Hajime felt his stomach twist and rip around the nails stapled to the walls, “Is… she okay?”

“She’s doing… fine.” Mitarai slowly replied, “Had a bit of a shaky morning. Would you like to talk to her?”

“Yes… if it’s not too much trouble?”

There was static and a muttering of voices in the background before he heard Tsumiki speak. “Hello? Hinata?”

“Tsumiki.” Hajime breathed out carefully, “I… read the text. How are you feeling?”

“I’m…” She trailed off, exhaling slowly, “I’m f-fine. I-I think… it w-was s-scary… I-I thought I couldn’t b-breathe… b-but… I-I was h-happy… in a w-weird way.”

“Happy?” That wasn’t a word Hajime was expecting.

“I-I t-thought a-at least I m-made h-her proud… m-mixed in w-with t-the despair o-of dying.” She clarified.

Her? Hajime tried to think who Tsumiki could mean. It couldn’t be anyone on the island, anyone they knew… but the only other person in his dreams was… that AI? What was her name? Hajime tried to think but it has been so long since that dream…
“S-sorry I-I don’t r-remember h-her name.” Tsumiki stammered, as if reading his mind.

“Oh, no it’s fine… I think… I’ve dreamed about her before…” Hajime looked over at his sketchbooks. He’d check later. “I just… wanted to make sure you’re fine.”

“T-thank you H-Hinata.” Tsumiki softly said. “I-I’m good…”

Silence filled their conversation. Hajime awkwardly held the phone. Now that he had… cleared things up with her… should he hang up now? Make his call only about her well-being?

“S-say…” Tsumiki made the choice for him, “I-I was wondering… a-are you free a-at the e-end of the month?”

The month? Hajime blinked, “I think so?”

“T-The h-hospital is h-having a s-special e-event for the children’s w-wing and w-we need volunteers…”

That sounded… Hajime smiled, felt the twisting at the bottom of his stomach stop, the nails slowly being pulled out, “That sounds like fun. I’d love to help. If I’m free. Tell me the dates and I’ll check.”

“Okay!” Tsumiki’s voice brightened. “I’ll send the information a-and you can g-get back to me!”

Suddenly she sounded comfortable, strong and certain. It was a delight to hear. “Sounds good.”

~

There was a certain buzz on campus that was scooped up and concentrated in Hajime’s class. He stepped inside and immediately felt a strong wave of something emitting from a group of people. Pausing, Hajime stared, trying to sort out what it could be. Picking a place to sit, he began to pull his supplies out and mentally ran through their calendar. What was it? A class critique wasn’t until next week… no major projects were due soon… probably not until the end of the month into March… it was only February…

Oh. Hajime let out a gasp and felt his ears burn a bit. Of course, it was February… Valentine’s Day… was the fourteenth. What would he do? He and Komaeda hadn’t celebrated it together. What did people even do for Valentine’s Day? Hajime thought back to high school, with girls (and some boys) making and wrapping cute chocolates and gifts for those they fancied.

Did Komaeda want that, to celebrate a mainly commercial holiday? Hajime stared at his canvas. Would it be best to ask him? Or should Hajime do this in secret and surprise him? Did it matter what the day stood for secularly? It was the thought that counted… so he should get a gift? Or make something?

Hajime rubbed his head. He had no clue… it suddenly felt like a daunting task, one he couldn’t do alone. Pulling his phone out Hajime stared. Maybe he should ask for advice? Maybe that was the best course of action… he had time. Hajime quickly scrolled down his contacts and picked Sonia.

“Hey, Sonia I got a question… what do people usually do for Valentine’s Day?” – Hajime

His phone lit up a second later. That… was rather fast…

“Well, let me think… usually they buy or make something chocolate related? Oh, are you thinking of getting Komaeda something?” – Sonia
“Uh…. Yes?” – Hajime

Honesty was the best here…

His phone lit up, almost dancing with Sonia’s excitement.

“This is perfect! I need a local to help me with this!” – Sonia

“My country does things differently. I’ve been told Japan handles this holiday in a different manner. Something about a White Day?” – Sonia

Oh right… there were few places that had a day like White Day… Hajime bit his lip.

“Um, yes that’s when the person who received a Valentine’s gift reciprocates.” – Hajime

“How unique… we just have Valentine’s Day as a catch all… anyways shall we go shopping together? I need advice too.” – Sonia

“A-Advice? I need that too…” – Hajime

“Oh dear… it seems we are both pickles… I shall ask someone else to help us!” – Sonia

“It’s… in a pickle… and um… is that necessary?” – Hajime

Did they have to drag someone else into this? Hajime sighed. Maybe it would be easier to ask Komaeda directly…

“Koizumi says she is free and willing to help!” – Sonia

“We shall leave this in her capable hands!” – Sonia

Koizumi? Hajime bit his lip. That was… a better option than some of the other people Sonia could have asked… So long as Saionji didn’t hear… the teasing he’d have to endure… it would be too much. Hopefully Sonia and Koizumi had some mercy.

~

“You needed help to buy your boyfriend a present so you’re asking us?” Saionji’s voice was the first thing to greet him. “Well I have to say at least you used your brain. Mahiru is like the best at picking presents out.”

Hajime twitched, sighing, “Thanks Hiyoko… though… coming along shopping? Isn’t that going to ruin the surprise?”

To his shock, Koizumi turned her head and blushed while Saionji sported a half glare have flushed look in his direction, “Not that you need to know… but no… it won’t.”

“Uh…” Hajime blinked. He had stepped on something that he shouldn’t pursue, “Okay anyways thanks for coming along to help me.”

“It’s no problem!” Sonia piped up beside him, “I too need help picking something.”

Koizumi nodded, “Well the first thing we need to establish is… what do you want to get?”

“Food?” Hajime tilted his head, “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? Chocolates?”
“Really?” Koizumi put her hands on her hips, “So narrow minded… you can get whatever you want, really… it’s chocolate companies that put it into our minds that we need to buy chocolate. For the sales, of course. I mean… it’s easier to…”

She paused and whipped around, suddenly pointing at him, “Wait, are you that lazy Hajime?!”

“L-lazy?” Hajime stepped back, “Where did this come from?”

“Buying chocolates? Everyone knows making something gives it more meaning.” Koizumi huffed, “If you want chocolates, we should make some!”

Make them? Hajime stared, “But… we’re already out… in this shopping district…”

“Then perhaps I can suggest something?” Sonia cut in, “We can buy the ingredients to make chocolate if that’s what Hajime wants to give to Komaeda…and we can buy a little something else. Like a card?”

Her idea was good… Komaeda had a lot of things and something small and meaningful like a card was a good idea. He could buy some card stock paper and make one later after the chocolates…

“Okay, I like that idea. I’ll buy some cardstock paper then.” Hajime decided, “And we can make chocolates.”

“Then let’s get to it!” Saionji tugged at Koizumi’s arm, “Though… I do have a small issue with this plan.”

“An issue?” Hajime asked, feeling his stomach sink a bit.

“Do any of us know how to make chocolate? From scratch, I mean.”

Silence filled their group. No one said anything. Hajime sighed. “Okay, so we look up a recipe and…”

“Or…” Sonia softly added, “We ask an expert?”

～

Hanamura’s restaurant was bustling, people crammed into the doorway. Hajime bulged at the number, but Saionji hurdles herself forward, pushing past people, elbowing as she went. A few let out cries of indignation but she continued. Hajime awkwardly walked in her path, adding some apologies as they went, until they reached the front.

“I’m sorry ma’am but you’ll have to wait in line…”

“I’m not here to eat.” Saionji cut the waiter off, “I’m here to see the owner.”

“The… owner?” The waiter blinked, “Do you have an…?”

“No.” Saionji glared, “But I need to talk to him. Now.”

“If it is a complaint ma’am we ask that you write it down rather than…”

“Ohoh, what’s this? What are you doing here?”

Hanamura walked up, smiling, “Why hello there, fancy seeing you guys.”
“We want to talk to you. Privately.” Saionji snapped.

“Privately?” Hanamura slowly repeated, “Well that’s just… very forward and… frankly I didn’t think you swung that way…”

“You’re so gross.” Saionji glared, “Keep it clean.”

“Right, right.” Hanamura deflated, “Well don’t hold up the line, come to the back.”

Following Hanamura to the back, Hajime gingerly stepped past a few chefs who gave a look, though Hanamura’s mother was there and she waved. Stepping into another room, one with a couch and table, they all sat down.

“Sorry for coming unannounced.” Hajime said for them.

“It’s fine. I suppose surprises are good every so often.” Hanamura replied, “Though is this talk going to be quick? I… do need to get to my kitchen…”

“It is.” Sonia confirmed, “We were just wondering if you had a recipe for chocolates.”

“Chocolates?” Hanamura repeated before smiling, “Oho I see… you’re getting ready for Valentine’s Day… well that’s very sweet you came directly to me…”

“We know we could have phoned but… we were in the area and thought it would be faster.” Hajime filled him in.

“I see… I see… well I suppose that’s good you came today… we close early on Sundays. That’s why it’s so busy now… and I’m taking the Monday and Tuesday off… so we can stay late and work…”

“Uh… stay late? Work?” Saionji stared.

“Oh, you’re right… it doesn’t have to be tonight.” Hanamura agreed, “I just think using this kitchen is easier than mine at home, given the amount of people…”

“Wait, use your kitchen?” Hajime pieced it together, “But… we can’t impose like that… we just wanted a recipe… we can cook else where…”

Hanamura gave a firm look, “Nonsense Hinata! Do you know how delicate the process of chocolate making can be? We need space… proper heat… ingredients… kitchenware… no, no we’ll do it here.”

“What kind of chocolates do you want?” Hanamura continued to talk, eyes sparkling, “No wait, we’ll do a variety… a sort of mixed box… do you want alcoholic chocolates too? Wait of course, you do, never mind….”

What had they unleashed? Hajime looked at the others for support, but they were all staring. Koizumi was the first one to speak.

“We don’t mean to push you today…”

“Come back at six, okay?” Hanamura ordered, completely ignoring her, “We’ll make the best chocolates. So good that Komaeda and Tanaka will be stunned!”
The amount of ingredients on the counter… Hajime gaped. Hanamura on the other hand tied his apron tighter and threw an extra one at Hajime, smacking him in the face.

“Don’t just stare, let’s get moving. Making chocolates is easy, but can be time consuming depending on what you want to do.”

“Uh… right…” Hajime tied the apron on, “I just… have no idea where to start.”

“Me neither Hajime.” Sonia confirmed, “I believe this will be a learning experience for us.”

“I don’t know why we’re here…” Saionji mumbled, “We weren’t planning on chocolates…”

“It will be a fun experience Hiyoko.” Koizumi patted her shoulder, curling her arm around.

“Now, now let’s start!” Hanamura cheered.

Instructions flowed smoothly from Hanamura’s mouth, his motions clear as he supervised them, occasionally showing how to do something. Hajime couldn’t help but stare a bit at the fluidity of his actions. Hanamura was alive in the kitchen. Everything was an extension of himself, no clunky motions.

“You’re not mixing.” Hanamura poked him, “You don’t want the milk burnt. It can burn. Stir it!”

“Sorry.” Hajime started to move, “I was just… watching… you’re really graceful in the kitchen.”

Hanamura blinked before grinning, “Well that’s very sweet of you, but you got Komaeda to compliment… unless you want to… add something into…”

“… that’s not what I meant…” Hajime flatly replied.

“Shame…” Hanamura gave a laugh and patted his arm and walked over to Koizumi.

~

The chocolates sat in the freezer, in a basic cardboard box. Hajime had a blank on sitting in his room, a simple candy cane pattern, along with a blue ribbon. Paint brushes sat in water, murky from the paint he had used. Komaeda’s card sat by a slightly open window, letting the smell of paint escape his room.

Carrying the water and brushes out to the kitchen, Hajime spotted Souda at the table, biting his lip, writing in a notebook, textbooks open. Draining the water, Hajime stopped. Should he run the water? Would it ruin his concentration?

“It’s fine Hajime.” Souda said suddenly, leaning back, “I’m almost done anyways… stupid questions…”

“Ah, okay.” Hajime ran the water and rinsed the cup out before he moved onto the brushes, making sure no bits of acrylic paint stuck.

“So, since you’re here… I wanted to ask… what are you and Komaeda going to do for Valentine’s Day?”

“What?” Hajime’s mind blanked, “I don’t know… I bought a gift…”

“I mean,” Souda continued, as though Hajime hadn’t spoken, “Besides each other.”
It took Hajime a moment to compute what Souda had said. Burning, his cheeks flushed and warm, his mouth dropped, “Oh my god… KAZUICHI!”

“What? It’s true…” Souda shrugged, “Look man, I just want to know if I have to spend the night out of here or not…”

Grumbling Hajime turned back to washing his brushes, “Look… you won’t have to leave…”

“Oh, so you want me here? Kinky.”

“I… didn’t mean it like that…” Hajime shot a glare, “I just… look… we won’t… come back… here… okay? If we do anything…”

“Okay, okay,” Souda grinned, “Teasing you is too much fun. Not sorry. It is what friends are for, yes?” He gave a cheeky grin.

Hajime turned back to washing his brushes, fighting the smile on his lips from forming.

~

Komaeda tilted his head, “I don’t know? We could do the… normal thing?” He asked, “Like dinner and such? Honestly, whatever you want to do is good. It doesn’t have to be fancy.”

“Oh… okay.” Hajime snuggled closer, “Honestly we don’t have to go out… we can just do whatever we want…”

“In that case…” Komaeda hummed, “Why don’t we just go out for the day? Go on a walk or go to some museum or something? I can ask June to make something nice and we can have a quiet dinner at my place.”

Hajime smiled, “That sounds good.”

~

A muffled buzz of his phone against his desk woke Hajime up. Rolling over he thanked the world silently that he didn’t have classes, and picked it up. Wincing as the bright screen blinded his eyes.

“Hello?” His words slurred together.

“H-Hajime…” Owari’s voice was low.

“Akane?” Hajime rolled into his blankets.

“I’m sorry… it’s early… I just… can I come over?” She asked. “I mean later… you can sleep and… stuff…”

“No, no it’s fine.” Hajime sat up, “Kazuichi is up early anyways, for school.”

“I… thank you.” She sucked in a large gasp of air, “I’ll… be over soon…”

Hajime let the call drop. Flopping into his bed he estimated the time it would take her. She didn’t have a car, but the bus to her place was frequent due to school. It would be probably forty minutes at most. Turning the heater on, Hajime gave himself a few moments in bed, until the room was warm enough for him to get out and change. Yawning he turned the heater off and walked into the kitchen, happy Souda was up.
“Oh, hey what are you doing up?” Souda asked at the table, a mug of coffee at his elbow.

“Akane is coming over.” Hajime yawned and bee lined to the coffee maker.

“She is?” Souda asked.

“She had a bad dream… asked if she could come over.” Hajime poured himself some coffee. “Sorry I should have told you.”

“It’s fine.” Souda replied, “It just happened. How long until she’s here?”

“About thirty… twenty minutes?” Hajime asked, “Depends on how fast she catches the bus.”

“Okay… do you want something to eat?”

“No… I’m good.”

They sat in silence, Hajime nursing his cup of coffee, Souda fiddling with some project. When the doorbell rang, they both jumped, Souda faster, more alert, and closer to the door. He answered the door, greeting Owari, closing the door as fast as he could. Hajime got up and grabbed another cup of coffee.

She walked into the kitchen and plopped down. Hajime set the coffee at her elbow. She snatched it up and cradled it in her hands. “Sorry… it’s cold out there…”

“It’s fine.” Hajime sat back down.

“Sorry for this… I just… I didn’t even have a bad dream…” She mused, “It was of me and… Nidai… we were sparring… training. I was having such a good time… and then he gave me a massage and… I just… I knew at that moment I was in love with him…”

Hajime reached over and touched her hand. She took the hand off her coffee mug and let him gently rub her hand. “We’ll find him. I’m sure.”

“I… know.” Owari looked down, “I just… seeing all of this… for Valentine’s Day… just reminded me how alone I am…” She gave a weak smile, “I mean… I got you guys… but… what if he doesn’t like me? What if we find him and he already has someone? Or he just… doesn’t see me romantically? Is it bad to be thinking about that before I even know… not dream him?”

“Well… I don’t know if I’m the best for this… but I think it’s fine to be honest how you feel… but to not shove it onto him.” Hajime slowly said.

“How did you and Komaeda work it out?” Owari inquired, sipping her coffee.

“Oh… I just… stopped seeing if he remembered and genuinely enjoyed his company?” Hajime half asked, “I would have liked him even if we didn’t have these dreams.”

“I… thank you Hajiji.” Owari drank more coffee, smiling a small smile, “Sorry that’s pathetic… coming here just to whine about my lack of love life…”

“No, no it’s fine.” Souda and Hajime said at the same time.

“We’re here for you.” Souda gave a grin, “Hey, now that you’re here, let’s make breakfast together. What do you want?”

“Don’t you have class soon?” Owari asked, “I don’t want to make you late…”
"It’s not for another hour… we can make something quick… or I could just skip… it’s a boring lecture anyways…” Souda muttered. “But let’s not worry about that! Let’s get some food!”

~

Valentine’s Day landed quietly on them. Hajime double checked his chocolates and the wrapping. Carefully, he inserted the card on the side, and waited for Komaeda to arrive. He didn’t have to wait long. The car pulled up and Hajime walked slowly over, opening the door carefully.

“Hello Hajime.” Komaeda greeted.

“Hey Nagito.” Hajime settled in and pressed the present to Komaeda’s side, “For you.”

“Thank you Hajime.” Komaeda smiled, “I got something for you too, but it’s at home… though it doesn’t look nearly as cute at this.”

Hajime blushed, “We employed Hanamura’s help…”

“We?”

“I went with Hiyoko, Mahiru, and Sonia.” Hajime explained, “He taught us how to make chocolates… I hope they turned out okay.”

“I’m sure they did.” Komaeda assured, “And you made the card too. Thanks Hajime.” He leaned over and kissed him lightly, “I was thinking, of going to an art museum… we haven’t gone in a while.”

Hajime blinked and looked at his clothes. He had dressed casually, “It isn’t something I need the suit for, is it?”

“Oh, no.” Komaeda shook his head and began to drive. “Regular clothes are fine.”

“Good… I didn’t want to go back and change.” Hajime sunk into the seat, “So, what’s the exhibition?”

“It’s interactive installation pieces.” Komaeda replied, “It looked fun. The artist experimented with illusions and perspective. If we take pictures it will look like we’re a part of the piece… that sort of thing.”

“Sounds fun.” Hajime smiled. “Also, I was thinking… we could watch a movie at your place too?”

“Do you have something in mind?” Komaeda asked.

“No, not really.” Hajime shrugged, “But we can pick later.”

“Okay.”

The drive was short, Komaeda taking a few side streets. When they arrived at the museum, he parked and they walked inside. Hajime nearly protested when Komaeda pulled out his wallet to pay for the small fee, but Komaeda pinched his side and Hajime closed his mouth. He did however, note a small café attached to the museum. He’d buy their drinks later.

Stepping into the gallery, they walked around, seeing giant sets of various things. Hajime smiled, feeling like he had shrunk in a house. There were giant balls of yarn and knitting needles, as well as a sort of obstacle course. A few kids were running around, in sock feet. Hajime carefully stepped out of his shoes and walked around, feeling the plush floor underneath.
“It’s like Cinderella.” Komaeda muttered, “Like we’re the mice in the house.”

“Yeah, it is.” Hajime agreed, “Hey, let’s take a picture of us with the yarn.”

Komaeda turned and convinced another couple to take the picture. Hajime thanked them once the photo was done. They walked around and went into the next room, which had massive doors and corridors, frames that looked like mirrors, but allowed them to walk between nearly identical rooms. More pictures were taken and maybe a couple quick kisses stolen.

Like Hajime predicted, they ended up at the café. He quickly snatched the bill when it came along with their orders. Komaeda raised an eyebrow, but didn’t protest.

“This was amazing.” Hajime looked through his phone at the photos, “I saw there is another exhibit upstairs. Want to look after this?”

“Sure.” Komaeda agreed, “I think it’s a painting gallery.”

“Okay.” Hajime turned his phone over, “Look at this one.”

“It’s a good photo.” Komaeda stared, “Send it to me?”

“Done.”

They finished their coffee and after Hajime paid the bill, they went upstairs to the gallery. Like Komaeda had said, it was filled with paintings. Hajime stared, loving the colours and vibrancy in each piece. As they looked, their hands laced together, fingers curling against each other.

~

June had a nice meal out for them when they arrived home. Hajime blushed and remembered the last time they had a meal, only the two of them. Candles were lit and he was sure they were burning something subtle and soft in the background, giving a pleasant smell to the room.

“Wow… this is…” Hajime touched a rose in an elegant vase, “These are nice.”

“I’m glad.” Komaeda blushed, “I didn’t want to be too cliché… but I had to buy a few roses.”

“I like it.” Hajime sat down.

“Anyways.” Komaeda coughed, “I got your present… would you like to open it now or later?”

“Well you reminded me, so now.” Hajime laughed.

“Okay.” Komaeda walked over to the corner of the room and pulled out a black box, handing it to him. “Go on.”

The box was nondescript, but Hajime could sense it was something valuable. Carefully he undid the satin ribbon holding the box together and opened it. Inside was a small round gold frame with a picture of them. It was the one they got together during Christmas. Hajime carefully picked the frame up. His eyes widened at the weight. Was the frame…?

“It’s real gold.” Komaeda cut in, “It was something my grandfather had… we were cleaning up after the new year and I found it and… thought… maybe I should give it to you.”

“This…” Hajime set the frame down, “Thank you… this is… so nice.”
“I got another frame.” Komaeda said, “It came in a set of two. I thought… maybe we could have the same frames…” He blushed.

“Thank you Nagito.” Hajime set the box on the table and leaned over to kiss him, “I love it.”

Komaeda pulled him back for another kiss, a bit deeper, before pulling away, “Let’s eat before dinner get cold. After we can try the chocolates you made.”

“You sure? They’re for you…”

“And I’ll share with you. I think the chef can try his own creations.” Komaeda replied.

When he put it like that, Hajime couldn’t say no. Nodding his head he waited until Komaeda was sitting down. Saying a quick word of thanks, they began to eat.

~

Curled languid and warm in Komaeda’s arms was the best way to end the evening. Hajime lazily traced patterns on Komaeda’s chest, ticking up to his collarbones and to his arm. Komaeda hummed in response, wrapping his arm loosely around Hajime’s hips.

“This was a nice day.” Hajime said. “Sorry about the movie.”

“We wouldn’t have watched it all the way anyways.” Komaeda laughed, “You’re too distracting.”

“Me?” Hajime poked his arm, “I’m not to blame.”

“Right, right.” Komaeda laughed, “I suppose I’ll take the responsibility this time.”

“Damn right you will.” Hajime replied before pressing a kiss to the edge of Komaeda’s jaw, “But I’m not complaining… too much.”

Another laugh erupted from Komaeda’s lips. Hajime felt the vibrations in his chest as he laughed, pulling Hajime closer. “Well if we wanted we could get up and finish the movie. It’s not too late.”

Hajime thought about it, but he shook his head, “No… I think I want to stay like this.”

“Sappy.” Komaeda poked him this time, but made no attempt to move.

~

“The volunteering is on a Saturday and Sunday at 9:00am… if you still want to do it. You don’t have to do both days if you don’t want to. Please tell me as soon as you can if you can make it.” – Tsumiki

“Both days are fine. At the City Hospital, right?” – Hajime

“Yes! The south one!” – Tsumiki

“Just tell them you’re volunteering and sign in. I’ll be there to greet you.” – Tsumiki

“Thanks, Tsumiki. Can Nagito come too?” – Hajime

“If he wants.” – Tsumiki

~
The day was warmer than usual. Hajime gracefully unwrapped his scarf from his neck and stuffed it into his bag. The warm spell was probably temporary, but he’d savour it while it lasted. Slipping into the building, Hajime made his way to his next class, an Art History one. Finding a seat, he pulled his book and notepad out, tapping his pencil on the edge. He had three art projects in painting alone to complete. Plus, some printmaking and a sketchbook to hand in for drawing. He frowned. Should he be wasting his time in a lecture?

Glancing at the textbook, Hajime bit his lip. They were only going to go through the chapter today… and he saw the teacher’s slides in advance… sitting would be a waste of two hours…

Packing up quickly, Hajime made his executive choice. Slipping out before too many people or the lecturer came, he walked towards the printmaking lab. He could do painting at home, but he couldn’t do lithographs at home. Maybe he’d get some prints in…

Entering the building, he spotted the coffee place attached to the library. Maybe he could grab a cup and drink as he finished some touch ups to his lithograph before starting the printing process…

The line wasn’t too long. Hajime pulled his wallet out and picked his order. As he moved closer to the till, he saw the tables filled with people either working on school or drinking coffee. A group sat a bit away, but Hajime froze. Komaeda was there, talking with a group of people, his back to Hajime. Textbooks and notebooks littered the table. Clearly, he was in a study session.

Paying for his drink, Hajime walked over. He could say hello, even if it was quick. A few people stopped talking and paused, staring at him. Carefully Hajime leaned into Komaeda, wrapping his arms around him.

“Hey Nagito.” He greeted.

Komaeda turned around as best as he could with Hajime’s arms around him, “Hajime?” He blinked, “I thought you had Art History?”

“I decided printmaking was higher on my priority list.” Hajime replied, “I just wanted to say hello before I went to the lab.”

“I see.” Komaeda smiled, “By the way, I’m sorry I didn’t reply to the text about Tsumiki’s volunteering. I’d love to come with you. Do you want me to pick you up?”

“You drove last time.” Hajime replied, “I’ll do it.”

“Ok…” Komaeda agreed, “Oh, sorry everyone, this is Hinata Hajime. Hajime, these are a few of my classmates.”

“We’re doing a studying session.” One of the girls piped up, “I’m Yuzuki.”

“Nice to meet you.” Hajime unwrapped his arms from Komaeda, “I won’t keep you from studying.” He looked at Komaeda, “I’ll see you later.”

“Of course,” Komaeda tugged on his hand.

Hajime flushed, but willingly bent down so Komaeda could kiss him gently, before leaving as fast as he could. He’d let Komaeda deal with any reactions from the others.

~

Thankfully, Tsumiki gave them a guest parking pass. Hajime weaved around the rows, locating an
empty spot, and began to back into the parking. The day was starting, with sunlight streaking in, but he was still a bit tired. Beside him, Komaeda yawned, making Hajime yawn with him as he parked.

“Tsumiki said she’s inside.” Hajime shut the car off.

“I saw a sign on the way in, saying we should report to the front desk.” Komaeda said.

They exited the car, lacing gloved covered hands together. Hurrying inside, Hajime spotted a table set with the sign Komaeda mentioned pointing them in the direction.

“Hello.” The nurse said, “You’re here to volunteer?”

“Yes. We’re here with Tsumiki Mikan.” Hajime replied.

“Okay, she said we should expect two people. Names?”

“Hinata Hajime and Komaeda Nagito.” Hajime said for them.

The nurse looked at a large clipboard, flipping a few pages before grabbing a pencil, marking something down, “Okay, we made you name tags. Please keep these on while you’re here. At the end of the day, you can return them at this table.”

Hajime picked the name tag up, slipping the thin lanyard around his head, “Okay. Thank you.”

“If you walk down this hall you’ll find room 115. It’s where you can keep your jacket and other things. We’ll lock the door, so if you need anything during the day, just ask someone helping with the volunteering.”

Nodding, they walked down the hall, finding the room, open with another nurse to greet them. Tsumiki wasn’t in the room, but there was space to hang their jackets, as well as a place to change their shoes. Hajime walked over and hung his jacket, took his boots off, and slipped into a hospital pair of slippers.

“I’ll text Tsumiki and let her know we’re here.” Komaeda said.

“Okay.” Hajime said, “Let me hang your jacket up.”

Komaeda handed his jacket over. Hajime was happy they were the first ones, giving them the option to put their jackets where they wanted. A few snacks were on a table as well as some coffee. Hajime eyed it, hoping to get a cup in.

The nurse at the door began to talk to someone, voice too soft to hear. Hajime turned around, hoping it was Tsumiki, a hello on his lips, but instead had to hold in a gasp.

He was bigger than Hajime imagined, with broad shoulders, a broad chest, and a staggering height. His clothes were non-descript, comfortable looking track wear. No chain was around his neck, but there was a necklace, a tag and chain that snuggly bounced against his chest as he walked in. Spotting them, he grinned wildly.

“Good morning!” His voice boomed, “My name is Nidai Nekomaru! Pleased to meet you!”

Hajime dryly swallowed and stared. This… was unexpected… what did he say? Slowly he turned to Komaeda, but he too was staring. Nidai blinked and waved his hand in front of them.

“Hello?” He asked, his voice still loud.
“Uh…” Hajime forced himself to speak, “Sorry, uh I’m Hinata Hajime and this is Komaeda Nagito. Nice to meet you Nidai-san.”

“Just call me Nidai!” He laughed boisterously, “Is it all right if I call you guys Hinata and Komaeda?”

“That’s… fine.” Komaeda agreed.

“Excellent!” He reached out and in a Western fashion, shook their hands. His grip was tight and warm. “The nurse said we can help ourselves to the snacks on the table.” He informed them.

“Right.” Hajime gave a small smile, “We’ll be over in a moment…”

Nidai left and Hajime immediately whipped his head to look at Komaeda. He was biting his lip. “We should text Owari. At least.”

Before Hajime could answer, he spotted Tsumiki walking in out of the corner of his eye. She too froze as she spotted Nidai, wringing her hands in her scrubs, before spotting them and walking over quickly.

“I-I… um…” She wiggled her head in a small motion towards Nidai. “O-Owari…”

Komaeda nodded, “I’ll… text her…”

“D-Do you t-think he remembers?” Tsumiki pitched her voice low.

That was the question of the morning. It appeared volunteering would be a lot different than Hajime had anticipated.

Chapter End Notes

Hawaiian Pizza: I love Hawaiian pizza, but like the pineapple on pizza discourse is strong... apparently?

Wine: Japan's drinking age is 20 and everyone in this fic is legal drinking age.

Drinking and Driving: Japan has a ZERO tolerance drinking law. If you drink any amount of alcohol you cannot legally drive.

Self Defense: I took one class one time on basic self defense that's more meant to get you away from your attacker. One thing I remember from the class is knives are useless if they can't stab you. If you cannot get away, trying to lock their elbow and prevent them from making a "stabbing" motion is a good strategy.

Valentine's Day/White Day: As I am sure most are aware, in Japan Valentine's Day (traditionally) is where girls give chocolates to the guys they like. Making your own chocolates is a bonus. Then on March 15th the boys can give back to the girls (known as White Day). Also I'm not 100% sure but I think some other countries do a similar day to White Day (like South Korea... I think?).

Art Gallery: Way back when I was in high school I did a two week home stay in Japan and at Tokyo Tower they had this exhibit with optical illusions. The one with the same
room and the frame that looks like a mirror was one of those. I took a picture that made it look like I was walking out of the mirror. It was a lot of fun.

Bill: In most restaurants in Japan, they give you the bill along with your order. A bit frustrating for me because it means if I want dessert I feel inclined to order it immediately and not bother them again.

Lithograph: a type of printmaking where you draw with a special pencil like thing on a metal plate and wash it before you're able to use ink and make prints.

Coffee place by a library: I am literally basing this off one of the buildings in the first University I went to... honestly I'm just having printmaking war flashbacks writing this...

PDA: Pretty sure 90% of PDA in Japan is not as common (or acceptable), but here... I can do what I like.

Indoor shoes: Are not just limited to schools, but to many places in Japan. During last year I helped out at an International Fair and we had to change shoes when we used the kitchen.
Sliding Pieces Together One at a Time

Chapter Notes

Sorry for taking so long to update this story! I am moving back to Canada, so I got super busy this past week or so with cleaning and packing. I then had to show the new person around. But now that I’m done all that and relaxing with my last couple of days in Japan, I got to sit down and finish this chapter, which had sat about 85% done. I hope you all like it. I definitely am taking some stuff slower than I expected, but that's fine. I like adding scenes.

As always feel free to leave kudos or comments. Not needed, but always make my day. Your support for this story is amazing and I'm always grateful. So, thank you all again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After a while the room was filled with people, all wearing the same lanyard, all volunteers. Hajime carefully steered close to Nidai, but not too close that he got wary. Quickly Hajime pulled his phone out and checked it. It was early, but Owari was usually up early. Yet, his message sat unanswered. Pocketing his phone, Hajime tried to ignore the heat it radiated from his pocket. She’d answer soon enough. Right now, he should start a conversation, but what to say?

The answer came almost immediately. Nidai edged closer to the table, picking up a muffin and a cup of juice. Hajime slipped over, feeling Komaeda follow him silently as he checked out the food. It was mainly a continental breakfast. Humming Hajime eyed everything, weighing what he wanted more. So far, he was stuck between a Danish and blueberry muffin.

“Nagito, do you want anything?” Hajime asked, deciding on the Danish.

“A muffin please.” Komaeda answered.

“You’re going to have to be more specific.” Hajime pointed out.

“Blueberry please.” Komaeda said.

Hajime picked up the muffin and handed it to Komaeda before looking over at Nidai, who was still standing near them. “Um, Nidai?” Hajime tried.

“Yes Hinata?” He asked.

“So, um just wondering, do you volunteer here often? It’s our first time.” Hajime added.

“New to this, huh?” Nidai brightly said, “Yes, I volunteer frequently.”

Frequently… Hajime stored that information away to tell Tsumiki. Hospitals didn’t often hold volunteer events, but it would be good to keep an eye out anyways.

“What’s it like?” Komaeda asked, “What do you do?”

“It’s always fun!” Nidai said with a boisterous voice, “Usually we just have fun. The kids all have various abilities, so usually they’re split into groups and we do things like stories or games.”
“Sounds like fun.” Hajime smiled, “What are the kids like?”

Nidai was about to answer, but one of the nurses started to talk, gathering them around. Hajime waited and watched as she split them into groups based upon the colour of lanyard they had. Shuffling over to the side, Hajime stood beside Komaeda and Tsumiki, who had the same colour as they did. After they were split up, the teams started to leave, each team with about three workers. Two more people joined Tsumiki and together they all left the room.

Hajime followed Tsumiki out of the staff room, Komaeda in tow. The hospital was bustling with activity, nurses talking to patients, families gathered on benches, and volunteers milling around. There were signs all over, but with Tsumiki’s help, Hajime barely had to read them. Steering them to the children’s ward, Hajime spotted a rather colourful sign and a change in tone. The children’s ward was brighter, almost uplifting with more sunlight streaming in. More people were around and Hajime almost reached out to hold onto Tsumiki less they get separated. Edging around people and uttering more than a few apologies, they ended up down a hall labeled “Wing C”.

“We’re g-going to be in this w-wing.” Tsumiki pointed.

The wing was long and Hajime could see signs indicating where room numbers were. “This is a large wing.”

“Y-Yes… one of the b-biggest wings.” Tsumiki nodded, “W-we’ll split into s-smaller groups.” She cleared her throat and waved her hands to the group, “U-um e-excuse me…”

Some people stopped talking, but most of the group in the back didn’t pause. Tsumiki swallowed and raised her voice a little bit, “I-If I c-could have y-your attention…”

One of her coworkers opened their mouth, but before they could speak, Nidai stepped up.

“All right listen up everyone!”

His voice rang through the hall, causing a few other nurses and patients to stop and stare. But, at least everyone was quiet. Tsumiki shot a warm look to him, before one of her other coworkers took over.

“This is Wing C, one of the biggest wings in the children’s hospital. We’ll split you up into groups to visit the children. You’ll have about an hour with the kids before moving onto the next room. If there are any problems please come to one of us or one of the other nurses immediately.”

Hajime swallowed. His palms felt a bit sweaty, but with Tsumiki and Komaeda he was sure it would go well. They were further split up, but luckily Nidai was added to their group. Hajime nudged Komaeda lightly. This was a good opportunity. Pulling his phone out, Hajime checked it, staring. There were fifteen unread messages, all from Owari. He scrolled them, mainly her demanding they talk to him and then proceeding to say she wanted to come over…

“Akane… we’re volunteering… you need to be signed up in advance…” – Hajime

“I want to see him!” – Akane

“I know, I understand but, the hospital won’t let you.” – Hajime

“We’ll tell you all about it later.” – Hajime

He added the text and pocketed it, praying Owari wouldn’t do anything reckless and get herself kicked out of the hospital.
“Everything okay?” Komaeda leaned over.

“Akane wants to come here.” Hajime softly told him. “I had to tell her that isn’t a good idea.”

Komaeda nodded, “I’ll mention this to Tsumiki, tell her to text Owari too.”

They started to move, Hajime watched as Komaeda gently pulled Tsumiki over, whispering. Tsumiki paled a bit, but nodded. It was out of his hands now. Hajime followed the other nurse into their first room. The room was large, with many soft cushions and soft floors. Kids of all ages and stature sat neatly, some fidgeting a bit, with a few nurses near them. After everyone filed in a kid stood up.

His hair was a startling shade of orange red. His right arm was in a cast, doodled with drawings and pictures. His head was also bandaged and knees sporting a few Band-Aids. He waved his good hand.

“Welcome! I’m Masaru Daimon! We, the kids of Wing C welcome you. Thank you for taking the time to volunteer. Let’s have fun!” He pumped his fist and did a little dance.

All the kids cheered and the nurses looked a bit mortified. Apparently, their introduction was planned a bit differently. Probably less loud and with no dancing. Masaru didn’t seem to care as he sat back down and high fived a couple of kids as he did so.

“We got many things for you to do here, so please, pick a station and have fun.” One of the nurses recovered from the introduction.

The kids immediately dispersed, all clamoring to a station. Some of the stations had games, while other areas had paper and art supplies. Hajime beelined over there, feeling Komaeda follow him silently behind. Sitting down, Hajime glanced at the table. A few of the kids were drawing, doodling on the paper, but one kid was fiddling with some paper, folding it. His hair was light and short and his face round and soft. If Hajime was asked to paint a cherub, he was sure the kid would be an excellent reference.

“Hello, what are you doing?” Hajime decided to start.

He slowly turned around, blinking, “Making a… sparrow? Or… was it a crane?” His fingers messily made a fold.

Hajime grabbed a piece of origami paper and sat a bit closer, “Cranes are easy to fold, let’s do it together… uh…”

“Jataro…” He supplied with a yawn.

Hajime nodded, “Okay Jataro, let’s start by folding it into a triangle…”

They fell into silence, with Hajime occasionally prompting and instructing, until their cranes were complete. Jataro’s was a bit wobbly, but it looked like a crane. Hajime set his down neatly.

“Wow… mister… you’re good at… origami.”

“It’s Hinata.” Hajime supplied, “And origami is all about practice and mirroring your folds.”

“Show me another one.” Jataro ordered.

Hajime reached for another sheet of paper. What should they make this time? He was deciding when
suddenly something rammed into his side. Hajime fell over a bit, hitting the table. Behind him he heard a cheer. Turning he saw Masaru, arms crossed.

“Hey, quit being so boring Jataro!” He reached over and tugged, “Come, let’s race!”

“I… don’t think you can do that…” Komaeda piped up.

“Can too!” Masaru pouted, “This room is like… massive. We can do all sorts of things besides racing… like dodgeball!” He tugged on Jataro’s sleeves, “Come on!”

“Masaru… I’m not allowed to… run.” Jataro slowly shook his sleeves, dislodging Masaru’s hold, “My amnesia…”

“You mean asthma.”

A new boy walked up, with hair that looked… blue…? Hajime tried to not stare, but it was blue… was that even possible?

“Oh, quit it Naggy-sa.” Masaru stuck his tongue out, “Instead of being the fun police, hurry up and help me convince Jataro to race me.”

“I don’t think that’s wise, given his acute asthma…”

“Asthma can’t be cute weirdo.” Masaru cut him off before turning to Jataro, “Come on, Monaca even said she’d be our referee…”

At once both Jataro and the blue haired boy brightened, though the blue haired one coughed immediately afterwards.

“Monaca… said that? But she knows that…”

“Monaca knows how to have fun.” Masaru corrected. “So, let’s go.” He then finally looked at Hajime, “And I suppose you too. We need teams.”

“Teams?” Hajime asked.

“Yes?” Masaru stared, “Like in PE? Come on let’s go…”

“Are you thinking of running inside again? Isn’t that what landed you in here?”

Hajime turned. Nidai was there, kneeling so he was closer to Masaru. His eyes immediately brightened and he launched himself at Nidai, arm around his shoulders.

“Old man!” He gleefully cheered, “You came! How much practice am I missing? You aren’t replacing me, are you? I’ll have you know that I’m a much, much, much better shot than stupid Ritsuki.”

“That’s no way to talk about your fellow team mate.” Nidai scolded, but easily scooped him up.

“Oh fine… but like, it’s true I’m a better player…”

Nidai ruffled his hair and set him down, “Tell you what, why don’t we have a little training session here?” He looked over at the blue haired boy and Jataro, “You too Nagisa, Jataro.”

Nagisa… that was his name. Hajime watched as he shuffled over, biting his lip, “Are you… sure?”
“A little arm wrestling won’t hurt anyone.” Nidai assured him with soft eyes, “Now let’s get to it. You can ask Monaca to come over here too if you like.”

Nagisa blushed a bit, but walked over to where a girl sat in a wheelchair, her hair looking almost green in the light. Hajime rubbed his eyes. First blue hair and now green hair… did the hospital let the kids get into hair dye?

“Do you and Komaeda want to join us too?” Nidai asked, “Tournaments are fun with more people.”

Hajime nodded, “Sure, sounds good, right Nagito?”

“Right.” Komaeda agreed.

It seemed that Nidai’s tournament was already known. Many kids were already gathered around the table, excitedly talking. Nidai sat down and he was swarmed by the kids. It was cute. Hajime hovered and watched as Nidai and Masaru broke everyone into pairs, the boy beaming and looking at Nidai with bright eyes.

Focusing, Hajime looked who he was paired with and stared. The girl had long, pink hair, tied neatly at each side of her head. She eyed him critically.

“I can’t believe my partner isn’t even adorbs…” She sighed before putting her arm down, “Well, let’s get this over with.”

Adorbs? Hajime blinked. He never expected to be… insulted? Not that he was particularly scathing… just interesting. “Okay, I’m Hinata Hajime.”

“Kotoko. Don’t think I’ll go easy on you!” She proclaimed, “Did you know that only the female black widow spider’s bite is dangerous to humans?”

“Uh…” What was that about?

“I’m trying to say that girls can be dangerous too.” Kotoko snipped.

“Oh yeah I know.” Hajime agreed, “People shouldn’t judge based on gender alone.”

Kotoko puffed up, smiling a little, “Perhaps you’re a bit adorbs.”

They arm wrestled and she was surprisingly strong. Hajime still put up a fight, painting and moving canvas had to count towards something, but ultimately, he lost. She beamed.

“I won! Good match.” She stood up bowing dramatically, “Until next time.”

She walked and Hajime found himself trying to not stare again. Her right leg was prosthetic, smooth with plastic and metal below her knee. Kotoko noted and Hajime flushed a little.

“It’s state of the art.” Kotoko proudly said, “Look at the sleek design, the flow of the metal and plastic! It can withstand a lot of weight too. Shame it isn’t pink…”

Pink… Hajime looked. It was plastic, right? Surely there was some sort of paint or something that could change the colour. Why limit the colour scheme? Perhaps colour was too expensive? Hajime wasn’t sure. He wasn’t familiar enough…

“I’m sure there is a way to get it pink.” He said without thinking, “Like there are certain paints that adhere to plastic better than…”
Kotoko was staring at him this time, a bit of light behind her eyes before she twirled away without a word. Hajime bit his lip. Was it something he said? Turning to Komaeda he saw him still in the rounds, moving to his next opponent. Walking over, Hajime sat beside him and watched as Monaca wheeled over to them.

“Hello, I’m…”

“Monaca doesn’t care about names.” She cut him off. “I’m Monaca.”

… wasn’t that hypocritical of her? Hajime held his tongue.

“Okay, let’s have a good match.” Komaeda easily continued.

“Just straight matches are boring, don’t you think? Let’s add in another rule, shall we?”

“Uh… okay what sort of rule?” Komaeda asked.

“If you lose I can draw on your face.” Monaca proclaimed.

Draw… on his face? Hajime blinked. What kind of rule was that? And why something so specific? But he couldn’t ask. Her words rang loudly in the room and at once all the kids in the tournament looked over, staring at Komaeda, waiting his response. Komaeda barely batted an eye.

“Sure, what not?”

Their arms rested on the table, Monaca smiling. Hajime looked at Komaeda. Was he really going to go through with this? Leaning over, Hajime considered adding in his thoughts, when suddenly a swarm of kids tackled Komaeda, all of them helping Monaca push his arm down. Hajime stared as they cheered.

“Looks like I win.” She gleefully said.

“Isn’t that cheating?” Hajime pointed out.

“I never said I had to win by myself.” Monaca retorted before grabbing a marker.

~

It was challenging to not laugh after they left the room. Hajime did his best, but the moment they walked out he snorted, a smile filling his face. Komaeda looked at him and it was hard to not laugh louder. He… had a circle and an X on his face… some cat whiskers and… was that idiot written in tiny letters?

“D-Do you want to w-wash your face?” Tsumiki asked.

“Oh no, it’s fine.” Komaeda beamed, “I actually want to see what they did. Take a picture for me Hajime?”

Was Komaeda purposefully letting him document this? Hajime reached into his pocket and took a picture dutifully. “Here.”

Komaeda looked and hummed, “At least there isn’t something obscene on my face… though is that idiot written here?”

Hajime didn’t answer. Nidai walked up and smacked Komaeda hard on the back, “What a champ.” He grinned, “Sorry, it’s been a while since I saw the kids so energetic. This was a great
tournament… though we never got a winner…”

“Sorry.” Komaeda wheezed a bit.

“No, no it’s great.” Nidai assured him, “Sometimes all we need to do is be a bit goofy to entertain the kids. Some are stuck here for a while…” He trailed off.

“It’s a small price to pay I agree.” Komaeda said as he linked arms with Hajime, “Though I wonder if this will encourage the other kids…” He thoughtfully poked his face.

They walked out of the hospital after, Komaeda’s now marker laced arms hidden in his coat. Hajime couldn’t help but laugh loudly as they got into the car. Komaeda took the passenger’s seat and examined his face.

“At least they didn’t add more to my face…” He muttered.

“You could have washed and given a clean slate.” Hajime told him.

“And waste this art?” Komaeda shook his head, “I’ll wash my face when we’re back home.”

Hajime chuckled and began to drive. Komaeda leaned into his seat smiling, “This was fun.”

“It was.” Hajime agreed, “And we met Nidai.”

“Oh right,” Komaeda pulled his phone out, “How is Owari?” He stared at his phone, “She texted me too…”

“What did she say?”

“Just asking if we found a way to get his number… or a way to contact him.”

“I’m sure Tsumiki technically knows…” Hajime muttered, “But that’s illegal.”

“Right.” Komaeda tapped out a reply, “And searching for people is difficult…”

“Though it might be easy…” Hajime offered, “The way Masaru talked to Nidai… it seems that Nidai is a coach for sports.”

“Are you suggesting for once we can find someone based on public information and not sneaking around?” Komaeda asked, “What a novel idea.”

Hajime rolled his eyes, “Critique our techniques once you’re not covered in marker.”

Owari sat across from him, twirling her spoon. Hajime pushed over a plate of biscuits. She accepted one and munched slowly. Watching her, Hajime waited for something, anything, but all Owari did was eat.

“Sorry we didn’t get anything.” Hajime said slowly.

“It’s okay.” Owari swallowed, “I just… wish I was there… I want to see him.”

The words to assure that she would Nidai made their way on Hajime’s tongue, but he couldn’t say
that… he had no backing. Instead Hajime sipped his coffee and carefully thought his next words.

“I… know that not seeing someone you want to see is difficult… but I think… sometimes things align and chances will happen.”

“Like you and Komaeda?” Owari asked with a small laugh before giving a smile, “Thanks Hajime.”

Finals smacked Hajime over the head with the subtly of an alarm clock. Projects lined over projects and he was scrambling the last bit to get them done. The only positive light was the weather, which was warming up. Soon he could put away his heater and kotatsu and finally some of heavier clothes too.

Throwing the last layer of paint over a project, Hajime leaned into his chair and groaned. This was it. He was done… no more. Wobbling over to the sink, Hajime began to wash his stuff, mindlessly letting the repeated motion of washing fill his brain.

He was almost done when Souda stumbled in, rubbing his hair, which was messily piled on his head, complete with a pencil sticking out. Clad in nothing but a pair of sweatpants and a ratty shirt, Souda breezed past him, reaching for his mug.

“Coffee…” Souda groaned.

Hajime checked their coffee maker, “Sorry no coffee.”

Souda stared at him and his eyes watered. Hajime froze and set his brushes down, immediately walking over to their cabinets, pulling out filters and ground coffee.

“I’ll make some.” Hajime quickly said.

“You’re a lifesaver.” Souda flopped into Hajime, half leaning and half hugging him.

“No problem.” Hajime returned the hug, patting Souda’s back a few times.

Souda pulled away and ambled over to the table, muttering about formulas and other things lost to Hajime. Leaving Souda for a bit, Hajime put the coffee on before going to the table.

“Studying going well?”

Souda groaned, “I’m trying to not remember…” He flopped over onto the table, “How is painting?”

“I’m not adding more.” Hajime sighed, “Sometimes I have to remember to walk away from my art.”

“Good idea…” Souda said into his arm, “But soon this will be over… and we’ll have sweet freedom…”

Freedom… what would he do once he had a break? There was a lot to do… perhaps he could get everyone together… The coffee was steaming and the light flicked off. Hajime shoved the thought away and stood up to get the coffee. After finals, he could decide and plan. For now, he had to concentrate on finishing his projects.

Hajime walked out of his Art History final feeling numb. His hand hurt and his brain was still tangled in artist names, dates, and medium used. It hurt and Hajime didn’t want to see another
painting or print by anyone for a solid two weeks. Adjusting his bag, Hajime pulled his phone out and checked. Unread messages sat, some from Komaeda, wishing him luck on his final. There were also some from Souda, but at the top with the most messages was Tsumiki.

Opening the app, Hajime quickly read her messages. Another dream… she was in a room in the hospital… a camera for recording, pulling curtains back, wearing a hospital robe… and a bag on her head? Hajime carefully read the last part… the part about the bag and head didn’t change. The context to the dream was vague, but Hajime was certain it was part of Trial three and Tsumiki’s trial. Why she was filming and what she was filming was left unclear… but he was sure they’d find out eventually. Quickly Hajime tapped out a response before pocketing his phone and exiting the building.

～

“How was your final?” Komaeda asked from the couch before turning back to the TV.

Hajime stepped inside. Souda and Komaeda were on the couch, a fighting game of sorts on the TV. It was hard to tell who was who, but Hajime ignored that to stare at the fact they had a video game console in the first place. Since when did Souda have that?

“I got a huge paycheck last week, some back pay and over time.” Souda said, answering Hajime’s unspoken question, “I felt that we deserve something fun.”

“Consoles and games aren’t always the cheapest.” Hajime said, “That must have been some pay check.”

“The game was on sale.” Souda protested before he sighed, “How do you keep winning?” He turned to Komaeda.

“Luck?” Komaeda shrugged, “Anyways, Hajime how was the final?”

“Mind numbing.” Hajime answered, walking over and plopping onto the couch. “It is a blur of questions now. And pictures.”

Komaeda shuffled over and wrapped an arm around Hajime, tugging him closer, “You’re done that’s what counts. You’re free.”

“Like you are.” Hajime poked him, “I can’t believe you ended so early…”

“Most of my finals were papers.” Komaeda replied, “So really it was a mix…”

“Ugh and here I am with another two finals.” Souda groaned before tossing an extra controller to Hajime, “Want to play a bit with us?”

Hajime accepted the controller and looked at the game, “I’m not very familiar…”

“Don’t worry.” Komaeda pressed a light kiss to the side of Hajime’s head, “It’s easy to pick up.”

“If you say so…”

“You’re going down.” Souda stated to Komaeda.

“If you say so.” Komaeda hummed, “Maybe Hajime will come to my rescue.”

“No way…” Souda pouted, “Hajime has realized the terror that you are. He knows the true evil.”
Souda quickly set up their next round, letting everyone pick a character. Hajime stared at the roister. There were so many… quickly selecting a character he was sort of familiar with, Hajime let Souda pick the stage. Surprisingly Komaeda was right about the ease of picking up the game. Hajime watched as Souda and Komaeda went at each other and found himself getting into the game and surprisingly won the round.

“Betrayal!” Souda gasped, “I’ve been betrayed by my bestie!”

“Hajime, I’m your boyfriend…” Komaeda poked him.

“I didn’t betray anyone.” Hajime rolled his eyes.

“Another round!” Souda declared, “Now that I know where your loyalties lie.”

“With myself?” Hajime gasped out, “There aren’t any teams… besides don’t you have finals to study for…?”

Souda picked his character and glared at him. Hajime sighed and went for another character, followed by Komaeda. He wasn’t going to get out of this was he? Best just get this over with and do his best…

~

“You look like you’ve seen better days…” Kuzuryuu poked Souda with his foot before stepping over him.

Souda rolled over and groaned, “Why was I the last one with finals this year?”

“That’s just the way it worked out I guess?” Hajime shrugged.

“Yeah, that happens sometimes.” Koizumi took a cracker from the bowl, “But we’re done so don’t complain.”

“You’re right…” Souda sat up, “Freedom… at last. We can do whatever we want.”

Kuzuryuu coughed. Hajime looked over. He was sitting beside Pekoyama and both had a bit of a flush to their cheeks. Hajime cocked his head. Kuzuryuu caught his gaze and immediately glared a bit, but the pink on his cheeks was there.

“So, about being free…” Pekoyama started slowly.

“You better clear your schedules this Friday.” Kuzuryuu finished.

Pekoyama blinked, “I… had thought of another way to say that…”

“Clear our schedules?” Saionji huffed, “You can’t order us around.” She paused, “But why?”

“We’re going to my Family’s onsen.” Kuzuryuu answered firmly, “For four days.”

“Wait, your Family’s onsen?” Owari perked up, “You own an onsen?”

“Yes, we do.” Kuzuryuu nodded, “So make sure you pack appropriately. We’ll come pick you up.”

Clearly, they didn’t have a choice. Hajime idly picked up his tea cup and drank from it. Well, not that he was complaining. A trip to an onsen sounded great.
The rooms were huge, tatami mats and beautiful decorations on the side. The futons were already laid out and the window open, revealing a gorgeous view of the mountains. Hajime set his bag down and walked over, taking it in. He hadn’t been to a traditional hotel in ages.

“This is really nice.” Komaeda walked up and wrapped his arms around Hajime.

Hajime leaned into the embrace, “It is. I never knew about this onsen.”

“I mean being here with you, but the onsen too.” Komaeda pressed a light kiss to the side of Hajime’s head.

A flush filled his cheeks, “You’re so…”

“You like it and you know it.” Komaeda spun him around and planted a light kiss to his lips, “Don’t deny it.”

Hajime pressed another kiss, a bit deeper, enjoying Komaeda curling his arms around him, and pulled away, “I like it. I like you a lot.”

“Dork.” Komaeda smiled and kissed him again before pulling away, “Want to unpack a bit or just grab our things and go straight to the onsen?”

“A long soak sounds very good.” Hajime admitted.

“Okay then.” Komaeda unzipped his bag and pulled out some toiletries, “Let’s go.”

They headed over to the onsen and walked into the male side. Quickly stripping, Hajime set his clothes into the basket and went outside. Steam rose around him and with the cool air of outside, Hajime saw swirls of hot and cold air. Heading to the shower area, Hajime sat down and quickly washed, making sure to also wash his hair. Komaeda came out some point in time and silently passed some body wash. When he was clean, Hajime went to the onsen and slipped inside, sighing with relief. He had never been to a private onsen before, but the silence that filtered the area was something he could get used to.

“This is great.” Komaeda sat beside him.

“Yeah, it is.” Hajime sunk lower into the steaming water, “It’s been too long since I’ve last been to an onsen.”

“Me too.” Komaeda nudged his shoulder, “We should go together some time, just us.”

Hajime blushed a little. “Sure… that sounds lovely.”

They curled closer, Hajime lightly splashing the water a bit. The sun started to set and the sky was slowly dipping into warm tones with a dusky hint. When Hajime felt a dizziness fill his head, he sat up a little, exposing his torso, enjoying the cool air.

The door to the side opened and Hajime glanced briefly. Souda rushed out, performing the fastest shower Hajime had ever seen and immediately plopped into the onsen. A moment later Hanamura walked out, sighing.

“I told you I won’t do anything.” He called out to Souda.

“Then why were you leering at me?” Souda sunk into the water.
“I wasn’t…” Hanamura rolled his eyes, “I already told you, onsen make everything too easy. There is no challenge, no thrill.”

“I still don’t believe you.” Souda half bubbled into the water.

Did Hajime even want to know? Hanamura sighed loudly one more time before he went to the shower area. Turning his gaze to Souda, Hajime poked his shoulder.

“You can sit up now.” Hajime said.

Souda slowly rose, water dripping from his face and ends of his hair. “Is he looking?”

“No.” Komaeda replied, “I don’t think he has any intention either. We aren’t high school kids. Naked bodies are just that, naked bodies.”

“He’s right you know.”

Hanamura slipped in, the water almost to his ears. Hajime blinked. Did no one take the proper time to shower up? But Hanamura’s hair was wet, not styled as he usually saw it. Now that it was wet, Hajime saw how long it was. It brushed Hanamura’s chin in soft almost wavy curls.

Souda started to slowly tread away, until he was hovering closer to Komaeda’s side. “Then why were you looking?”

“I was just appreciating the view… just because there is no challenge doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate.” Hanamura replied promptly. “Nice piercings by the way.”

Souda spluttered and Hajime whipped his head around. Souda hadn’t had any new piercings on his ears… did that mean…?

“I always thought ones on the hips would hurt.”

Hip? Hajime blinked. He didn’t spot those, but he supposed Souda moved so fast… and Hajime didn’t want to stare in that… area for too long.

“Uh… it wasn’t too bad…” Souda blushed.

“I didn’t know you had more piercings.” Komaeda said.

“Me neither.” Hajime added, “When did you get those?”

“A… while back…” Souda muttered, “Nothing too special. I’ll… show you later.”

Right. “Okay.”

“Oh?” Hanamura leaned closer, “Sure you don’t want to show now?”

Souda splashed him.

~

Wrapped up in a robe, Hajime walked down the hall to a large room, where a few people were milling around, chatting and talking. He spotted Tsumiki at the end of the table with Koizumi, Koizumi effortlessly braiding her hair in a complex manner. The braid was half wrapped around Tsumiki’s head and the end slowly draping over her shoulder. Saionji was leaning against Koizumi’s back, idly poking at her phone. Her hair was also braided, though it was a simple singular braid.
At the other side of the table sat Owari with Mitarai, Owari gesturing and laughing loudly as she spoke. Sonia and Tanaka were also at the table, but they were snuggled close, with Sonia patting a hamster’s head.

Hajime made his way in, opting to sit beside Tsumiki, “Hello, did you enjoy the onsen?”

“I-I… h-haven’t gone y-yet.”

“Yeah, who has a bath before dinner anyways?” Saionji asked.

“I wanted to enjoy the onsen immediately.” Hajime protested.

“I’ll enjoy my bath at a normal time like a normal person.” Saionji firmly said.

“Suit yourself.” Hajime sighed before looking at Koizumi. She was still working at the braid, “That’s a complex braid.”

“It’s not too bad with some practice.” Koizumi modestly replied, “I sometimes do Hiyoko’s hair before performances.”

“Yeah Mahiru had a period when she would photograph hair styles.” Owari piped up, breaking her conversation with Mitarai, “She did my hair too.”

“That’s interesting.” Hajime looked at the braid, “I admit I enjoy drawing hair styles.”

“I got a ton of references if you ever want them.” Koizumi offered, “You can ask for them later.”

“When you start up your calligraphy lessons again.” Saionji piped up. “Finals are done.”

Again? “I thought I was getting better…” Hajime slowly said.

“Are you saying when you get better at calligraphy you won’t want to see me anymore?” Saionji glared.

“Oh… no…” Hajime quickly replied, “I just… don’t want to take up your time, but if you like having me over…”

Saionji blushed and her glare sharpened, “Who said anything about liking your company??”

Koizumi coughed.

“I mean…” Saionji’s glare weakened a bit, “It’s not the worse company I’ve been subjected to…”

Hajime held a laugh. It was… cute. “I’ll start up calligraphy lessons again soon.”

Saionji turned back to her phone, leaning against Koizumi again. The braid was complete, Koizumi tying it firmly with a hair elastic before patting a few areas. “Shame we don’t have any accessories here… I could add a few…”

“I-It’s okay…” Tsumiki blushed, “T-thank you. This is v-very nice.”

“You’re welcome.” Koizumi replied.

Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama entered the room, followed by Komaeda and Souda. Komaeda immediately sat beside Hajime, curling closer. Hajime snuggled a little.
“Where’s Hanamura?”

“He got side tracked by the kitchen.” Komaeda replied.

That made sense.

“Dinner will be ready soon.” Kuzuryuu sat down.

Owari cheered a bit. “Good. I’m starving!”

“This is a very nice place.” Sonia gestured, “Thank you again for inviting us.”

“More like demanded…” Saionji coughed out.

“You’re welcome.” Kuzuryuu replied, “And don’t hesitate to shout to the staff for something.”

Owari nodded before turning to Pekoyama, “Say, Peko, will you join us later?”

“Join you?”

“For top secret girl stuff!” Owari proudly said.

“We’re going to do what I believe is called a… slumber party?” Sonia asked, cocking her head, “I’ve never done a Japanese one before…”

Was there a difference based on country? Hajime wasn’t sure and he wasn’t going to ask.

“I… sure that sounds good.” Pekoyama slowly replied.

“Oh ho, did I hear something about a slumber party?” Hanamura walked in, carrying a dish, much to the frantic look on the worker’s faces.

“Oh god, if you come anywhere near us later I’ll drop kick you out the window.” Saionji snarled.

For some strange reason… Hanamura looked almost pleased. Hajime decided to not ask. It would be worth more trouble in the end. Their first few dishes came out and soon everyone was eating, Owari and Tanaka demanding multiple toasts to various things. The evening rolled in with warmth and a fullness only food and friends could give and Hajime indulged shamelessly.

～

Hajime stumbled into their room with a giggle bursting through his lips as Komaeda fumbled with the light. The door shut behind them loudly, enough for Hajime to wince, but no one else was around, so he eased a bit.

“That was delicious.” Komaeda flopped onto the futon, “I’m so happy.” He rolled over, looking at the ceiling. “Come lie with me Hajime.”

That was an easy request. Hajime collapsed beside Komaeda, half on top of him. His nose buried into Komaeda’s hair. Inhaling he could smell the shampoo and the smell of dinner clinging to the strands.

“I said lie with me, not lie on me.” Komaeda poked him a bit.

“Same difference.” Hajime muttered, his breath pushing some of Komaeda’s hair aside, “You smell good.”
“I smell like myself.” Komaeda calmly said, “And dinner?”

Hajime leaned in and kissed the side of Komaeda’s neck, trialing up and down. Komaeda gasped, “Mm… you’re very… touchy.”

“You like it.” Hajime retorted, biting lightly.

“Yeah, I do.” Komaeda agreed and slowly tilted his head.

Morning streamed in almost intrusively, light just a bit too harsh. Groaning, Hajime rolled over and buried his face into Komaeda’s shoulder and pillow. Komaeda stirred beside him and curled an arm around his waist.

“Tell the light to go away.” Hajime groaned.

“Go away.” Komaeda’s words slurred.

Snuggling closer, Hajime wrapped his arms around Komaeda and slowly let his brain wake up, the cogs turning slowly, taking their time, until Hajime was awake, still nestled warmly against Komaeda. His body ached a bit, but that was what an onsen was for. Carefully Hajime sat up, untangling from Komaeda’s grasp and kissed him lightly on the forehead, before getting up. How they had stayed in one futon the entire night, Hajime wasn’t sure, but such accomplishments were best left to speculation.

Washing up, and brushing his teeth so the fuzzy feel left his mouth, Hajime wrapped one of the complimentary yukatas and walked out. Komaeda was still a lump in the futon, a bit of his hair sticking out.

“I’m going down for breakfast.” Hajime gently told him. “Are you going to get up?”

“No…” Komaeda muttered as he sat up anyways, the blanket pooling around his waist. Hajime spotted bruise and bite marks. A flush burned his cheeks.

“All right then.” Hajime kissed him lightly, “I’ll see you down stairs.”

Heading back to the room they had supper in, Hajime saw only Kuzuryuu sitting in the room, peeling a mandarin orange. Stepping inside, Hajime walked to the table and sat down.

“Good morning Fuyuhiko.”

“Morning Hajime.” Kuzuryuu pulled a section off the orange and ate it, “Komaeda still in bed?”

“He’ll get ready eventually.” Hajime answered, “Where is everyone else?”

“Owari went for a run… Tanaka was outside with the birds last time I checked… and Koizumi left with Saionji to explore the surrounding area.”

“There is a surrounding area?” Hajime asked.

“Yes, there is a small town near, just with basics like groceries and some shops. You can go check it out if you like.”

Perhaps he would. He could drag Komaeda with him. “That sounds good.”
Kuzuryuu hummed and ate another section of his orange before speaking, “I dreamed something last night.”

Hajime blinked. When was the last time he heard Kuzuryuu having a dream? Was it when he was in the hospital, acting strange? “What was it about?” Hajime cautiously asked.

“We were in a trial with… this giant blonde-haired girl. She… for a moment my heart ached with this idea, that I could see Peko again. After… everything that hope, it hurt more than I could bare.”

Blonde-haired girl… “I think her name is… Junko?” Hajime tested the name. It fell flat on his tongue. Was it right?

“I think so?” Kuzuryuu sighed, “Anyways… it was a lie, of course, but in that moment when I thought the impossible was possible… it burned.”

Kuzuryuu’s voice dipped. Hajime gently touched his shoulder, not commenting on the trembling that raced down his body.

~

“There are going to be fireworks tonight.” Koizumi plopped down.

“Yeah, so we’re going.” Saionji added.

Hajime nodded, “Sure, that sounds like fun.”

“Fireworks are always a good time!” Owari cheered.

“They’ll also have some festival food and activities, so let’s go early.” Koizumi informed.

“This gathering sounds rather spectacular.” Tanaka hummed, “I approve.”

“We haven’t seen fireworks in a while.” Komaeda mused, “This will be fun.”

~

They sat on the hill, cool grass underneath them. Hajime held onto a container of takoyaki and leaned into Komaeda, feeling his arms wrap around him. Komaeda’s chest was warm against Hajime’s back. Poking a takoyaki, Hajime lifted the container closer to Komaeda.

“Want one?”

“No, I’m good. Thank you though.” Komaeda replied.

Hajime ate the takoyaki and felt Komaeda tighten his arms around him. Snuggling a bit, the crack and flash of the fireworks snapped his attention. Looking up, Hajime saw the bright colours burning patterns into the sky. Smiling Hajime watched. At the side, he noted Koizumi taking out a camera and snapping a few pictures, Saionji tugging at her arm after. Both sat down and Saionji curled closer, looking at the camera for a second. A bit down, Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama sat beside each other, hands touching on the grass. Sonia and Tanaka were chatting, pointing to the sky, Tsumiki and Mitarai adding in every so often. Souda, Owari, and, Hanamura were a bit down the hill, Owari cheering every time a firework went off.

“This is nice.” Komaeda leaned his chin on Hajime’s head.

“Yes, it is.” Hajime turned and looked, “Remember our first date?”
“How could I forget?” Komaeda asked, “It was like this, just with more people… and warmer weather.”

Hajime cracked a smile, “It is a bit cool this evening, yes.”

Komaeda leaned closer, “I believe we also kissed?”

“At the end of the date.” Hajime muttered.

“Who said we had to do everything the same way?” Komaeda whispered.

Their lips met, pressing warmly together. Hajime felt Komaeda tighten his grip as he kissed, deepening the kiss until they pulled away a bit breathless. Hajime flushed, warmth filling his cheeks.

“Want another one?” Komaeda asked.

“Later.” Hajime muttered.

“Shame, but I can wait.” Komaeda cheekily smiled.

“You better.” Hajime sighed, but smiled.

Turning to look at the fireworks again, Hajime only watched for a moment before Koizumi stood up, “Hey, let’s take a group photo.”

Everyone perked up. Owari rushed over, dragging Souda and Hanamura with her. “Okay! Let’s do this!”

“But what about you?” Sonia asked, “If you’re taking the picture…”

“Oh, that’s fine.” Koizumi awkwardly shuffled, “I prefer to be behind the camera…”

“Nonsense, this is our event, please be in the picture. At least one.” Mitarai suggested.

“Yeah! I like having pictures with you.” Saionji added.

“It would make the memento of our gathering complete.” Tanaka urged.

“P-Please?” Tsumiki asked, “O-only if you w-want…”

“Well… if you insist…” Koizumi rubbed her head and walked over to a couple, talking for a moment before they came over.

“Okay let’s stand here.” Koizumi directed them, moving them until she gave a satisfied nod. “We’re ready.”

The couple counted down. Hajime felt Komaeda curl an arm around his waist. Sonia turned and her hair fluttered, tickling his arm. Hajime held still and smiled warmly, letting the couple take a couple of pictures, before it was deemed fine. Koizumi immediately exited the group and checked the photos, nodding.

“Thank you very much.” She said to the couple who shuffled away. She then turned to them, “Okay, let’s have another one.” She held up the camera.

Hajime gave another smile and let Koizumi take another picture.
They returned from the fireworks, backs a bit stiff and legs sore, but Hajime couldn’t have been happier. Fireworks were always a delight to watch and with a professional photographer with them it made the experience more memorable.

“Hey Mahiru.”

“Yes?” She asked.

“Thanks for taking the pictures.”

“No problem.” She smiled, “I also got some candid shots after. I’ll give yours to you later.”

She did? How did she manage that? Hajime hadn’t noted, but he supposed that was the point of a candid, “Okay. I look forward to those.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Koizumi walked away with Saionji, down the hall to the girl’s side. Hajime walked back to where Komaeda was, chatting with Souda and Tanaka.

“… I’m jus saying if we built a machine that shot fireworks…” Souda was gesturing.

“Such a powerful machine would be a weapon in the wrong hands.” Tanaka gravely added.

“We’d use it for good… I promise…” Souda protested.

“You’re implying I could help…” Komaeda bit his lip, “I don’t know the first thing about building machines…”

“I could teach you!” Souda perked, “Or you could just help pass things?”

“Would that be helpful?” Komaeda asked.

“Naturally it would!” Tanaka proclaimed, “Any hand is helpful in any task! Fear not the task of building a machine. We shall concur it together!”

Hajime poked Komaeda in the shoulder and hugged him a bit, “Building a machine without my help?”

“No way!” Souda gasped, “Hajime, you’re going to help too! Together we’ll all build the best firework machine!”

“I agree with that statement.” Tanaka nodded, “But what form shall this machine take?”

Souda blinked, “I… have no idea… I think… I got some planning…” He shuffled away.

What had they started? Hajime watched Souda retreating and turned to Komaeda, “Did… we perhaps start something?”

“Probably.” Komaeda shrugged, “But this sounds like a fun group project!” He smiled.

Right. Hajime gave a small smile.
Returning from the onsen gave an almost lift to Hajime’s spirits. A calm had seeped into his bones and muscles that radiated with a warm pulse. Setting his bag onto his bed, Hajime flopped down. Later he’d suggest ordering out to Souda, but for now he had some unpacking and laundry to attend to. Setting out to do that, Hajime sorted and worked, taking his laundry from the trip and from before to the laundry room, putting on a load.

“Hey Hajime.” Souda poked his head in.

“Yes?” Hajime turned.

“Want to order out?” Souda asked, “I’m thinking Chinese?”

Hajime smiled, “Exactly what I was thinking. And sure, Chinese sounds great.”

Souda pulled his phone out and began to type out some things before pocketing it, “Okay ordered. I hope you like sweet and sour.”

“I like almost anything.” Hajime answered.

“Good because if you didn’t I would have just eaten it all.” Souda laughed, “So, any plans for our break?”

“Not really?” Hajime said. “I’m sure I’ll find things to do.”

“Well if you want to do something with me just let me know. I am working, but I'll put my schedule up on the fridge.” Souda offered.

“Okay, sounds great.”

~

The invite was in their mail, the paper simple with some elegant flowers down the side. Hajime carefully opened it, reading a letter penned by Pekoyama, three tickets enclosed along with a pamphlet about her upcoming event.

Dear Hajime, Kazuichi, and Komaeda,

Enclosed are tickets and a pamphlet to the Japanese Arts and Cultural Festival as well as the location and time. You’re free to come and go as you please, so long as you got the ticket on you. Please don’t lose them, but if something happens tell Fuyuhiko or me immediately.

-Peko

“A letter?” Souda glanced over his shoulder, “From Peko?”

“It’s for that festival, the one where Hiyoko will be too.” Hajime passed the pamphlet over.

Souda turned the paper around and whistled, “Wow… do we have to dress up?”

Hajime peeked at the pamphlet, “It looks casual, like a family event. I don’t think so… but maybe we should check?”

“Good idea…” Souda opened the pamphlet, “Hey they’re also having food and musical performances… wow this looks so good…”

“I’ll text Peko.” Hajime informed. “And that does sound like fun.”
Sonia’s number stared at Hajime, blinking brightly in the dark room. Answering without another thought, Hajime winced at the time displayed on his alarm. “Sonia?”

“Sorry for phoning…” Sonia’s voice was breathy, “I just… need to talk to someone.”

“It’s fine.” Hajime softly said.

He lay in bed, waiting, heart pounding a bit as Sonia collected her breath, stuttering escaping her lips as she took in deep breathes. “I… was wearing this dress, it was so gorgeous, so white… my hair perfect… there was this mass of people… all wearing these bear helmets.” Sonia exhaled slowly.

“And in the middle, on this platform were my parents, cuffed and… this guillotine… I wanted it to be dramatic.” Sonia’s voice broke. “Next thing I knew…”

Hajime was awake, his mind racing with the picture Sonia had painted. It… was gruesome… he could see the crowd, taste the tension on his lips. Dramatic was exactly what she achieved, like some sort of twisted parody on historical executions. His heart twisted as his mind pulled up a similar dream with Souda… both killed their parents… while they were Ultimate Despair.

“Sorry…” Sonia was crying, “I… couldn’t tell my parents… I phoned and…” She cried louder, “I was there smiling the entire time, enjoying the pain in my heart as I watched the blade go down… killing my father first… just to see how my mother would react…”

“It wasn’t you.” Hajime carefully said, “It’s not the you now. Your parents are alive and well. You phoned them earlier. Nothing bad will happen to them.”

“T-Thank you Hajime…” Sonia gasped out, “I just… it was so real… so vivid…”

“Do you want me to come over?” Hajime asked, despite his brain loudly protesting and reminding him of the time.

Sonia was about to answer when Hajime heard a sound on the other end, some ruffling and movement and a low, voice catching in the phone. Hajime couldn’t make out the entire sentence, but Tanaka’s voice was calm, like he was talking to a frightened rabbit.

“It’s fine…” Sonia’s voice clearly rang in the phone, “I… I got… Tanaka…”

Good. Hajime smiled to himself, “Okay. If you need anything else, don’t hesitate.”

“I won’t.” Sonia said, “Thank you again Hajime. Good night.”

“Good night.”

The line clicked. Hajime stared at the screen and felt his heart sink deeper into his muscles and bones, pounding roughly against the confines. Sucking in a deep breath, Hajime shut his eyes. Sonia was fine. She had Tanaka with her. He could check up on her in the morning and perhaps visit her. Right now, he couldn’t do anything. Lying down, Hajime tried to sleep. It was easier said than done.

~

Owari had let them take a corner of the café and snuck a free plate of cookies. Hajime sipped his tea and pushed the plate over to Sonia, who accepted a cookie.

“Thanks for answering last night.” She bit delicately into the cookie.
“You’re welcome, but more importantly, are you feeling okay?”

“I’m… good.” Sonia swallowed roughly, “I phoned my parents and talked for a while. It’s funny, but hearing their voices soothed me. I feel like a child for admitting this.”

“You’re not.” Hajime gently told her, “Everyone gets scared and needs reassurance.”

“Thank you, Hajime.” Sonia smiled, “You’re really a good friend.” She raised her hand, “Ah Akane.”

“Yeah?” She turned impressively balancing a ton of dishes.

“Could I have more coffee when you’re free?”

“Of course.” Owari brightened, “Just give me a moment.”

She bustled into the back and returned in record time, carrying a pot of coffee, “Here you go.” She poured and then turned to Hajime, “Do you want something else too?”

“I’m good.” Hajime sipped his tea, “Is it just me, or are you busier than usual?”

“Sort of…” Owari sighed, “We got a shifting of workers and… it’s making working here a bit challenging. New management… new workers…” She leaned a bit closer, “To be honest, I’m thinking perhaps… I should find a new job.”

“What were you thinking of?” Sonia asked.

“The gym I’m going to is looking for instructors and such for classes.” Owari replied, “I used to do gymnastics and was pretty good at it. I’m thinking of… trying to get a position.”

“That sounds interesting.” Hajime smiled, “I’m sure you can do whatever you want.”

“Thanks Haji.” Owari ruffled his hair, “I’ll get you more tea.”

Hajime opened his mouth to say he didn’t want more tea, but Owari already bounced away, heading to the back. He drained his mug and waited. Owari probably wasn’t going to take no for answer and another cup of tea was fine.

“Has she said anything about you meeting Nidai?” Sonia softly asked.

Oh, right. Hajime blinked. It had been a while ago… with finals taking over his mind soon after. He stared at the path Owari took, like it would give him some answers, “She hasn’t said anything about it since I told her and we haven’t had a proper meeting about it, so I’m not sure how she feels.”

“Maybe we should ask Tsumiki if there will be another volunteer event?” Sonia pondered, “Or maybe we can find some way to find him?”

Hajime’s mind flashed to Tanaka and he grimaced, “The last time we tried to find someone we ended up doing more work stalking Tanaka than just going for it.”

Sonia laughed a little, “You got a point… but still there has to be a way to find him again. Did you learn anything?”

“He seems to be a coach.” Hajime offered, “One of the boys was talking about coaching and a team with him.”
Sonia sipped her coffee before speaking. “Then, why don’t we surprise Akane?” She suggested.

Finding Nidai online was easier than Hajime cared to admit. His name was on a page, linked through a community’s website, under the sports section. According to the bio he was a Physical Education and Sports Therapy major who liked coaching and dogs. Under the bio was contact info, a work email and phone number. Hajime jotted down the number and email before minimizing the window. Sonia hummed beside him, perched on his chair. Souda stood behind Hajime, staring at the paper.

“So, we just phone him?” Souda asked.

“Do we?” Hajime asked, “What do we say?”

Sonia stood up and pulled her phone, hitting her speed dial. A beat passed before she perked up, “Hey Tanaka, it’s me. I got a favour to ask of you, should you wish to accept…” She was silent for a moment, “I was wondering, if perhaps you could tell me when your work has an open day?”

She motioned for a pen and paper. Hajime quickly passed the pad and a pen. Sonia quickly jotted down a date and time, “Thank you Tanaka. Your assistance has been most helpful in our quest. Yes, I’ll divulge the details later…” She hung up.

“What is an open day?” Hajime asked slowly.

“It’s when his work collaborates with the local shelter and they let people interact with all the pets.” Sonia answered, “This is how we’ll get Owari and Nidai in the same room. Just listen to my instructions and it will go well.”

“Okay…” Hajime said.

“First, you’re going to email Nidai and say these exact words…”

Dear Nidai,

Hello, this is Hinata Hajime from the hospital volunteering? I hope this isn’t too strange, but a friend of mine works at Pet Metropolis. They’re having an open day where with the local shelter they let people come and meet the animals and potentially help with adoption. They’re looking for volunteers.

I know you usually volunteer with hospitals, but I couldn’t help but think about you. If you’re interested, please email me back. Thank you so much.

Hinata Hajime

“An… open day?” – Akane

“Yes, Tanaka has requested I ask for volunteers. Please? There are so many pets that it’s hard for the staff and shelter volunteers to keep up. It would be so much help.” – Sonia

“Well… I guess I could… when and where?” – Akane
Hajime’s phone buzzed. He jumped at the sound. It was for his email notification. Quickly turning his phone on, Hajime saw a reply from Nidai. His heart leapt into his finger tips as he checked the email. The response was positive. He let out a long breath of air and exited out, sending a text to Sonia.

“Was that him?” Souda walked into the kitchen.

“Yes, it was.” Hajime answered, “We got a positive answer. This… will work out. I hope.”

Chapter End Notes

Masaru: I envisioned him as a kid that keeps getting seriously injured through sports and other physical activity, so he’s always landing himself in the hospital with various sport related injuries. In this universe, his father is not abusive.

Jataro: In this universe he has severe allergies and asthma that frequently lands him in the hospital. His mother is not abusive in this universe.

Naggy-sa: Used the translated nickname for Nagisa because I love it.

Nagisa: I really didn't pick a sickness for him. Instead I think his father is a head doctor at the hospital so Nagisa goes to visit him. Also he knows Masaru from school. In this universe his parents are not abusive.

Kotoko: Her parents aren't abusive in this universe either.

Monaca: In this universe she is truly paralyzed, waist down. Also no abusive parents/siblings.

Drawing on face: I couldn't help myself... I had to add in the reference.

Kotatsu: A table with a heater under it. You can lift the top and put blankets and sit under it to keep warm. Very awesome.

Onsen: Hot springs. There are many hotels that operate with one as an attraction and they are the best things ever.

Hip piercings: I gave them to Souda because... why not? They look pretty in my opinion... and I always thought Souda would have many piercings.

Takoyaki: Octopus meat in a batter shaped into a ball. From Osaka, it's usually made during festivals and is delicious.
Chapter Notes

I AM SO SORRY THIS TOOK SO LONG!!!! T_T *profuse apologies*

Firstly, I got a sudden job in the next province over, so these past two weeks I've been busy up to my eyeballs packing, buying things, apartment hunting... etc. Secondly, I got NDRV3 and am slowly playing through it. And, finally, thirdly... I had a very difficult time starting this chapter. I had almost no clue what I wanted for like 85% of the scenes. However, I'm finally done! Again, I'm so, so sorry this took forever for a new chapter. I think I now got a grasp of what I want to do.

Anyways thank you for all the support. Your kudos and especially comments really help me write. Feel free to leave one and with that, please, enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The park was full, people with all sorts of pets, all different sizes and colours. Tanaka’s work had a few tents set up for the staff and volunteers to use as a resting place. Outside the tents were many tables for signing up, as well as tables with promos and merch. Hajime scuttled around, dodging some rather large dogs (that honestly, looked more like bears than dogs), and located Sonia. Her hair was tied up, curled into a bun. She was also wearing the most casual clothes Hajime had ever seen her in. The shirt was one of the shirts volunteers wore, the shop’s logo on it. Her jeans were faded and Hajime swore he could see splotches on the hem. In her arms was a clipboard. On her shoulder was one of Tanaka’s hamsters, the rounder one.

“Hajime!” She greeted brightly, “Where’s Kazuichi?”

“He’s grabbing some water bottles we bought for everyone.” Hajime told her.

Sonia smiled, “It’s appreciated. Thank you very much.” Carefully, Sonia handed him the clipboard, “Sign in please. I’ll go get you and Kazuichi a shirt.”

“Thank you.” Hajime accepted and began to fill in his information.

He finished in a few minutes, spotting Souda walking up with a case of water bottles in his arms. Hajime held out the clipboard, “Hey. Sonia says we need to fill this in. I’ll take those off your hands.”

“You’re a pal Hajime.” Souda practically dropped the case of water into Hajime’s arms. Hajime wobbled a little, arms straining. “Where’s Sonia?”

“I’m back!” Sonia reappeared, two shirts draped over her arm, “You can change into this in tent two.” She pointed to a tent with a sign reading “two” on it.

Accepting the shirt, Hajime walked inside. There was a pile of bags and other things from the store in one corner, making it a bit cramped, but he could manage. Taking his shirt off, Hajime changed, staring at the new shirt. Would this work? Hajime curled his fingers into the fabric. He hadn’t seen Nidai yet even when they did, they had no idea if he remembered anything. Or... if he would
remember something. Hajime shook his head. So far, everyone remembered eventually. They had to try, or they’d never know.

Exiting Hajime spotted Sonia. Souda wasn’t there, but Owari was, already changed and bouncing around. As soon as she spotted him, Owari raced over, picking him up in a hug.

“Hey Haji!” She grinned, “This is great! Look at everything! Sonia was telling me about some competitions we’re going to be supervising! Oh, and Tanaka is putting on a show for the kids. I got to see that!”

Hajime laughed, “It will be a busy day…” He hugged her back as best as he could, “You can… let me down now.”

Owari plopped him down roughly. Hajime stumbled a little, but managed to keep his balance. “You said we’re supervising some competitions?”

“Yeah!” Owari nodded, pointing beyond the tents to a large grassy area, “We’re going to supervise the dog race…”

She trailed off, her eyes widening. Hajime followed her gaze, swallowing thickly for her. Nidai stood there, laughing at something Tanaka or a fellow employee had said. The shirt he was wearing was stretched to the max, showing how big and tall he was. Hajime watched Owari’s mouth open and shut a few times before she whipped her head around, staring at them.

“Uh… we should go talk to Tanaka about what we should do…”

“Did you… set this up?” Owari asked, her voice pitched low, a whisper.

No need to lie. Hajime took a quick glance at Sonia and Souda. Souda was looking away, but Sonia was nodding.

“We did.” Hajime admitted, “We thought…”

Owari moved quickly, gathering them into her arms, pressing them close. Hajime’s elbow was poking Sonia’s arm and Souda’s hair was tickling the side of his face, but Owari was smiling, graceful, eyes closed, arms squeezing tighter, before she let go.

“Thank you.” She said before bounding off towards Nidai.

Gasping for air, Hajime straightened his shirt and watched. Owari poked herself in without a pause, hand out for a shake a moment later. Tanaka shot them a look, one with slightly raised eyebrows, but Sonia gave a smile back. Tanaka said something to his co-worker and then walked over to them, grinning the moment his back was turned.

“It seems our plan is blooming slowly. Perhaps if we work things right, something fruitful will arise from this meeting.” Tanaka said as he stood beside Sonia, stroking the hamster on her shoulder.

“It’s up to them now.” Souda shrugged, “So, I hear we’re helping with the dog race?”

“I’m afraid that was an illusion I asked Sonia to state to Owari.” Tanaka shook his head, “I’ve made arrangements for Owari and Nidai to spend their hours together. Hinata, Souda, you’re going to help with the registration for events. Follow me.”

That sounded a lot less exciting than watching dog races, but Hajime followed Tanaka, giving one last glance at Owari and Nidai. Sending his thoughts to them, he focused, listening to Tanaka give
instructions. It was straightforward, so without much delay they sat down at a table, forms and pens at the ready.

Repetition soon washed over Hajime, but in surprisingly good way. Every owner had a different size and breed of pet, and seeing so many at once was fun. Especially when he got to pet some, running his fingers through fur as their owners signed waivers.

By the time the dog races were starting, there was a lapse in people coming to the tables. Getting the okay to have a quick break, Hajime stood up, stretching, and walked over to get a quick look at the races.

Owari was cheering as she helped get the next round set up, but Hajime could see a tense stance in her legs and shoulders as Nidai stood near her. He also gave a few cheers as he helped, moving fluidly through the crowd. Every so often, Owari would sneak a glance, her gaze falling on the side of Nidai’s face. A soft smile filled her mouth, laced with a bit of rigidness.

“How’s it going?” Souda poked him in the side, his voice pitched low.

“It’s fine.” Hajime turned away. He shouldn’t be spying on his friend, “Let’s get back to the table before Owari spots us.”

Souda gave one final look at Owari and suddenly giving a thumb up, grinning wildly and turning to Hajime, “Too late friend.”

Hajime shot a look back despite knowing he should just walk away, and saw Owari, looking back at him, eyebrow slightly raised. A little bit of warmth crept up Hajime’s neck. He scuttled away, pulling Souda with him, wishing he would stop grinning.

~

“So, how did it go?”

Hajime set the calligraphy brush down, “It went well… Owari and Nidai talked the entire time. They got along well.”

Saionji snorted, “That’s like saying you and Komaeda get along well.” She rolled her eyes, “But… it’s nice that Akane has found… Nidai.”

“Hiyoko…” Hajime reached over to touch her hand.

She smacked it away, cheeks pink, gaze dropped to her lap, “I mean… it’s good because we can stop wondering where Nidai is. I’m sick of that being a topic at our meetings.”

Right. Hajime saw her cheeks darken, her hands gripping her kimono, before she looked up, gaze sharp, “Well? Don’t just sit here. You’re the one who said you wanted to keep working at your calligraphy.”

Saionji opened a rather large book and flipped through before pointing to a random page, “Do this one.”

“Yes Hiyoko…” Hajime grabbed a new sheet.

Koizumi laughed behind her hand and the camera flashed, “Are you excited for the Festival? Hiyoko’s routine looks amazing.”
Hajime carefully did the first stroke of the kanji, “I’m excited. It will be great to see Hiyoko’s dancing again.”

Saionji gave a smug grin, “Everyone is excited to see my routines. You better see my stuff first, okay?”

“Okay.” Hajime agreed, continuing the calligraphy. A moment later he finished, “How is this?”

The camera flashed before Saionji leaned over, “It’s passable.” She said after a long stretch of silence, “At least you’re improving.”

“Thanks, Hiyoko.” Hajime grinned.

She tried to swat him, but Hajime leaned away, laughing. Pouting, Saionji flipped through the book, stopping at another random page. “This one next.”

Was this punishment for laughing at her? Hajime stared at the stroke count, sighing. Oh well, arguing wouldn’t go anywhere. Best get this done. Getting a new sheet of paper, Hajime picked up the calligraphy brush and began.

~

They were sitting, at a table. Muted grey sunlight filtered in, staining the walls and floor in neutral colours. Hajime swung his feet, his bare toes barely touching the ground. Kamukura sat across from him, gaze unblinking. He was dressed in blacks, with a white shirt poking out, collar neatly pressed. The only colour in the room were his eyes, red and piercing.

Kamukura slightly tilted his head. Silence thickly coated the room, clinging to everything like a wine stain on white. Hajime felt the silence bleed into his skin, though his pores, down to his muscle and bones. It made his body sluggish, weighed down by liquid, sloshing in his veins, in his organs. Hajime shifted and felt the liquid hit the sides of his stomach. His jaw locked, tongue liquifying in his mouth.

Rustling. Hajime’s eyes widened slightly as Kamukura stood up, walking over to him. A hand, heavy, hot, touched his shoulder. It was like an iron branding, burning through clothes easily, into his skin, replacing the silence, chasing it out. Hajime gasped, mouth opening, everything coming to life.

“K-Kamukura.” Hajime’s tongue still felt like it was in between the stages of liquid and solid.

“Don’t be boring.” Kamukura’s fingers tightly gripped Hajime’s shoulder, “I don’t want to be apart of a boring person.”

Apart? Hajime turned his head, watched as Kamukura slowly faded, almost see through like cellophane. The room slowly started to bleed colour, seeping into the table, starting to web out onto the floor. Something spiked in Hajime’s stomach, like molten lava suddenly forming a spear and stabbing him from the inside out. Without a thought between his actions, Hajime’s hand was on Kamukura’s arm. Slowly he could see Kamukura become clearer, fuller in colour.

“No…” Hajime gasped out, hand curling against the fabric of his jacket.

Kamukura tilted his head and sighed. Reaching with his other hand, he touched Hajime’s hand, slowly peeling it off. Hajime felt the stab again. He tightened his grip. Kamukura paused.

“Why?” He asked, “Isn’t this better?”
Better? Hajime barely felt the word register in his brain, “Better for who?”

“Don’t ask boring questions.” Kamukura told him, “You already know the answers. Why won’t you…”

“Why won’t I what?” Hajime breathed out before Kamukura could finish.

Kamukura slowly exhaled and turned, pointing to the side. Hajime followed his direction, until he was staring into a mirror. The air sucked out of him. His hair was shorter, revealing his forehead, which had faint scars around in a ring, like a crown. One of his eyes was green, but the other eye was bleeding in red, slowly from the corners. The green was pushing back.

“You’re pushing back.” He pointed out dryly, “Why won’t you accept me?” Kamukura finished.

Accept him.

The words circulated in Hajime’s mind, rotating on an angle, as if he needed to see them in every possible way. The bedding clung to his sweaty limbs, and the coolness of his room was almost welcome. But Hajime couldn’t be bothered, not when his mind was turning.

What did Kamukura mean by accepting him? Wasn’t he just a part of another life Hajime had? A life that only appeared to him in dreams, one he never fully lived. Kamukura was nothing more than an entity from that life, a created one. So, why did Hajime have to accept him? Frowning, Hajime rolled over, tangling the sheets more. More importantly, how could he accept Kamukura? He felt so disconnected from Hajime, like a person only told about in passing. It wasn’t his problem… right?

Hajime’s heart tugged, heavily beating in his chest. Groaning, Hajime sat up, turned his heater on, and flopped back down. It… didn’t matter… in the end he didn’t know Kamukura, had no connection, and had no reason to accept or deny him. Hajime was neutral and that was fine.

Right?

Groaning, Hajime sat up, the air in the room warm enough for him to move around. Ambling over to his closet, Hajime rummaged through for a good pair of jeans and a shirt. After a pile of shirts toppled over, he sighed. Perhaps he’d have to clean his closet up a bit.

Giving his hair a light ruffle, Hajime turned his heater off and stepped out into the cooler hallway. Shivering slightly, he went to the kitchen and turned their heater on, sitting by it until the room was warmer. Then Hajime started to make coffee, his stomach not up to eating anything yet.

The coffee was almost done when Souda walked out, immediately meandering over to the heater, pulling a chair over, sitting beside Hajime. Yawning, Souda stuck his toes out, wiggling them over the heat.

“Good morning Kazuichi.” Hajime pointed over to the coffee machine, “Just put some coffee on.”

“Thanks Hajime.” Souda gave another yawn. “Hey, are you free today?”

“Yes, I am.” Hajime answered.

“Want to… I dunno do something?” Souda asked, “Like brunch or whatever you want…”
The coffee machine light flipped off. Hajime stood up and grabbed two mugs, “Brunch sounds good.”

Souda perked up, “Good. I know this place. Some of my classmates were talking about it and they apparently have really, really good pancakes…”

~

The place turned out to be a cute, local restaurant near the university. Inside, the place was mainly wooden, with wide windows, allowing for a lot of natural light. A few couples and sat, but otherwise, it was not busy. After being seated, Hajime picked the menu up, scanning. Pancakes sounded okay, but he didn’t want everything sweet. Maybe something else?

“I…” Souda spoke, his voice getting closer, “I… I dreamed something.”

Hajime set the menu down and blinked, “Okay. I should have brought my sketchbook.”

“No… don’t…” Souda’s face pinkened, “I mean… I’ve been dreaming, just not telling you… for a while.” He swallowed, “Don’t be mad… they were just… personal.”

Hajime tilted his head, waiting. Souda leaned in a little, hands twisting a paper napkin. The napkin was already ripping and tearing. A few pieces littered the table by Souda’s elbows.

“It’s just… I’m sorry for keeping them from you.” Souda muttered, “They’re really awkward, but I need advice.”

“I’m here for you Kazuichi.” Hajime said, “Take your time.”

Souda leaned back a little, still toying with the napkin, “Remember when we first met Sonia? How I had dreams about her, kind of like how you had dreams about only Nagito?”

“Yes.” Hajime replied.

“Well first I was convinced that maybe… you know… we had a thing.” Souda rubbed the back of his neck. “But… later my dreams made it apparent I… was a pest to her.”

“A… pest?” Hajime blinked. Sure, Sonia never sought Souda out explicitly, but they were friends.

“It never really hit me until… well later.” Souda completely shredded his napkin and had moved onto Hajime’s, “I… think me in the dreams… put her on a pedestal.” Souda kept picking at Hajime’s napkin. “… and then she mentioned dreams about Tanaka and… I sort of didn’t want to tell her, because… what if she thinks I still do?”

Hajime shook his head, “Sonia knows you aren’t idolizing her, treating her any different than anyone else.”

“But what if… she remembers?” Souda asked, “Or… more importantly she dreamt them and never told me?”

His shoulders shook, along with his entire body, rippling down. Hajime reached over and touched Souda’s arm, warmly laying it down. “Listen Kazuichi. Sonia wouldn’t do something like that. She listens to people, and if you brought these fears to her she would never judge you.”

Souda’s shoulders lifted and dropped drastically with his exhale. Hajime let go of Souda’s arm and waited as he stopped twisting the napkin, tossing it to the side. Straightening up, Souda gave a weak
smile and hit the server bell.

“Thanks Hajime.” Souda muttered just before their waitress came over.

Hajime gave a nod and picked the menu up, his stomach grumbling in agreement.

~

Hajime counted to ten in his head before he released Souda. Souda immediately sat up and groaned, rubbing his shoulders, cracking his neck a few times. Pekoyama immediately handed them towels, which Hajime took with thankful groan. Wiping his face, Hajime fell, back first, on the floor, staring at the ceiling of the dojo. The dark wooden beams were familiar to him. Hajime lazily stared, seeing the different shades the grain of the wood gave.

“Ouch… that was a good hold Hajime.” Souda flopped beside him.

“It was very good.” Pekoyama agreed, sitting beside them, “You’ve improved.”

Rolling over, Hajime looked up at Pekoyama, “Thank you. I feel confident.”

“Me too.” Souda agreed, “But… like we haven’t had anyone try to attack us. Those people never came back to my work.”

“Precaution always feels unnecessary until something bad happens.” Kuzuryuu announced his presence. “Like that one time we got kidnapped, right Peko?”

Kidnapped? Hajime sat up, staring. Kuzuryuu sat down, gaze even. Pekoyama nodded, their expressions not breaking. Was that… true? Hajime tried to think if Kuzuryuu or Pekoyama ever told them about this… kidnapping, but his mind was blank.

“Are you serious?” Souda voiced his thoughts, “You were kidnapped? Really?”

“Really.” Kuzuryuu nodded, “I was very young… but they made the mistake of kidnapping Peko too. She got us out, being the better student at self defense. We then got lost escaping.” Kuzuryuu chuckled, “But we were found.”

Hajime shivered. Even if it was in the past, being kidnapped was something that never crossed his mind. It felt like something out of a story, a work of fiction. Or a story that appeared on the news, something that happened to a stranger. Not one of his closest friends.

“So… you were fine in the end though.” Souda slowly said.

“Yeah, we were.” Pekoyama agreed, “It was an eye opener for us. We both threw ourselves into self defense classes and now we’re always cautious.”

“I see…” Hajime muttered, words lost, his mind wandering.

What would he do if a situation like that ever happened to him? Hajime wanted to envision, but nothing was coming up. A giant hole was in his imagination and all Hajime could think of was the idea of being kidnapped, stuck on the word and the concept.

“Do you think that will ever happen to us?” Souda asked quietly, voicing the thoughts Hajime couldn’t.

Kuzuryuu’s eyes darkened. Pekoyama shifted and suddenly Hajime wanted to edge away from them. Both of their postures straightened, along with a dark cloud dripping over them. Something
usually hidden slowly slipped out.

“It’s why we want you to do self defense.” Kuzuryuu’s voice was soft, “But…” His voice suddenly got stronger, “If anyone were to try, and after you or both of you are safe, I’d make them pay.”

Pay… it felt like a code word for kill. People used the phrase kill frequently. Hajime had heard students in his classes claim tests would do that, or parents would if their grades were terrible. He had heard people use it with context to busy days or work burdening them with stress. But… he had never heard it with the true meaning behind the words. There was no boast, no teasing, no empty words. The words held no emotion, nothing clouding them. It was smoothly spoken, factual, like Kuzuryuu had opened a science textbook and read something out of it. It was the truth… and it burned Hajime. It burned him in a pool of acidic truth. Hajime closed his eyes and saw it, saw the dream he had never dreamed, but had drawn and talked about so often it was engrained in his mind.

Trial Two.

Hajime swallowed. “Isn’t that like… the second trial?”

Kuzuryuu flinched slightly, his shoulders twitching upwards. Hajime felt an icy chill run over his back smoothly, like water falling over a ball of ice. His words hung in the air, solid and real. Hajime wanted to scoop them up and rearrange them, fix the order.

“Don’t… mistaken me.” Kuzuryuu slowly said, “The second trial wasn’t about justice, it was about revenge. Revenge coated in a thin layer of justice so it would be more palpable.” He shook his head, “No. If something happened to you or any of my friends… I won’t seek revenge. I promise.” He added firmly.

Hajime’s mouth twitched, wanting to ask Kuzuryuu where his line of justice and revenge was drawn. The two could be mixed, blurred until no clear answer was given, but Kuzuryuu’s eyes were steady. His gaze fixed on Hajime. Something flickered in his eyes, something unwavering. It was warm and cool at the same time, but it filled Hajime slowly, relaxing him.

~

There were people waiting already despite the early hour. Hajime and Komaeda followed Kuzuryuu, slipping past the lines, into the back of the center. More people, security, performers, and vendors all milled around, but Kuzuryuu walked with purpose, reaching a hallway along the side. Heading to a door labeled five, he knocked before entering.

Pekoyama sat, her hair neatly done up, her clothes wrinkle free. Her kendo gear sat, neat and clean on a small table beside the vanity. The shinai sat on her lap. Kuzuryuu lifted the bouquet he had been carrying, one filled with pastel spring colours, and handed it to her.

“For you Peko.” Kuzuryuu said with a small smile.

“Thank you.” She gently inhaled, smiling, “They’re nice. I’ll have to arrange them when we’re home.”

Komaeda nudged Hajime, elbowing his side lightly. Hajime gripped the card he made in his pocket and stepped forward, “I made you a card, but Nagito wrote in it.” He carefully took it out, passing it to her.

Pekoyama looked at the front, at the mountain and forest Hajime had done in water colours, and gave a warm smile, “Thank you Hajime, Nagito.” She set it on the vanity counter.
“Well, we’re going to see Hiyoko now.” Hajime announced, “Room eight, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll catch up.” Kuzuryuu shifted.

Hajime gave one last grin and walked out with Komaeda shutting the door carefully. Lacing their arms together, Hajime walked down the hall until they found the room.

“Hey Hiyoko, it’s me Hajime.” Hajime called out as he knocked firmly.

“One moment!” Koizumi’s voice rang out.

A bit of shuffling escaped the room, before the door opened, Koizumi tucking a flower behind her ear, holding a side of her hair back. She was wearing a green kimono, with golden accents and birds scattered around the edge and hem of her kimono. The obi was also gold, but as she turned around, Hajime saw green laced in the elaborate knot.

“You look lovely.” Hajime sincerely said.

“Thank you.” Koizumi gave them space to walk in, “You two clean up well.”

Komaeda laughed, “You act like you’ve never seen us in suits.”

“I mean,” Koizumi huffed, “You change your suits and don’t wear the same ones.”

Hajime blinked, “I didn’t think you’d notice.”

“It’s a photographer’s job to notice things like that.” Koizumi informed them.

“Ah, of course.” Komaeda laughed, walking inside, tugging Hajime along.

Saionji was sitting by the vanity as well. Her kimono was a pale orange, with swirling blue lines running horizontally along her sleeves and the bottom of her kimono. At the bottom with the blue lines, sat a few darkly coloured koi fish.

“You look lovely too.” Hajime told her.

Saionji puffed her cheeks, but Hajime saw pink, “Compliments will get you no where Hajime… but I appreciate them.” She eyed them, “You look decent.”

“I think Hajime looks wonderful.” Komaeda supplied.

“Of course, you would.” Saionji stood up, the blue flower in her hair not moving. Hajime silently bet it was due to an inhumane pact with bobby pins, “You better watch my show first.”

“We will.” Komaeda agreed, “What time is it?”

“First performance is at 10:00.” Saionji replied, “You won’t miss it. It is on the main stage.”

“Main stage… got it.” Hajime repeated before he reached into his jacket pocket, “I made you a card. Nagito wrote in it for us.”

Saionji accepted it, looking at the sunset over the beach, “Classic.”

“Look at the back.” Hajime urged.

Saionji turned it around, reading his calligraphy for “congratulations”, brow furrowed, before she
looked up, “Well, you’ve improved… naturally since I helped you fix your worthless writing.”

Hajime laughed, “You’re a good teacher.”

“Naturally.” Saionji agreed.

The door opened with a knock, Kuzuryuu standing at the frame, Souda now behind him, tugging on his tie.

“Hey,” Kuzuryuu waved, “Kazuichi finally joined us.”

“You… walk too fast.” Souda muttered, “Also the stage was really interesting…”

“Grease monkey.” Saionji huffed.

“Hey…” Souda protested, but Kuzuryuu touched his shoulder.

“We’re done here. We’ll see you outside.” He tugged on Souda’s shoulder, pulling him back, “You too Hajime.”

“Right. I’ll watch your performance.” Hajime said as he exited.

“You better!” Saionji called out as the door shut.

~

Everything was bustling by the time they returned outside. Vendors were already selling things, guests milling around, and pictures being taken. Many news stations were there, reporters talking and interviewing people. By some of the cameras were obviously sponsors, all of them talking to each other or some reporter. Kuzuryuu sighed and straightened his tie.

“I best get this over with.” He muttered, “Otherwise they’ll try to hunt me down.”

“Good luck.” Souda gave a wide grin.

Kuzuryuu gave a look, complete with an eye roll, and walked over. Immediately three reporters jumped, racing towards him, microphones in hand. Hajime turned away, less they see him gawking and think it was an invite to something.

“Let’s look around.” Hajime said, “I am thinking of getting something for your parents Nagito.”


“Right! Make a good impression on your future parent-in-laws, huh?” Souda elbowed him.

Hajime flushed, “Kazuichi… it’s not like that.”

“Uh huh…” Souda elbowed him again, “Lead the way.”

All the vendors were different. Hajime stopped and looked at one with handmade blown glass items. Looking at some of the necklaces, Hajime settled on one with an orange yellow swirl, almost in a sphere shape. Souda meanwhile, was talking to one of the vendors, questions about the process. Hajime waited, holding his neatly wrapped parcel.

The next booth they looked at was all wooden objects, smooth and polished. Hajime glanced, most of the objects not appealing to him. Turning, Hajime was about to leave, when he felt someone wrap
their arms around his waist, fluffy hair pressing into the back of his neck. Hajime relaxed and tried to reach back, patting Komaeda’s arm at an awkward angle.

“Hello Nagito.” Hajime said.

“Hey Hajime.” Komaeda’s chest vibrated against Hajime’s back. “Are you going to get me something too?”

“Very funny.” Hajime broke their embrace, turning around, only to hug Komaeda properly.

“For my mother, right?” Komaeda poked the bag.

“Yes, it’s for your mother.” Hajime replied, “I was just looking to get something for your father.”

“Oh?” Komaeda raised an eyebrow, “I can help you with that.” He then looked over at Souda, “Kazuichi, enjoying this so far?”

“Yeah… it’s interesting…” Souda muttered, “Everyone here uses such different techniques for things…”

Komaeda blinked. Hajime laughed, “Well, Kazuichi was talking to a vendor earlier.”

“It’s so cool!” Souda grinned, “Anyways, I spot some metal work. I’m going to look.” He started to leave.

“Be sure to make it to Hiyoko’s performance.” Hajime called out.

Souda gave a wave in confirmation as he walked away. Turning back to Komaeda, Hajime linked their hands, “So, you’re going to help me?”

“Yes, of course,” Komaeda grinned, “While my parents are still distracted talking to others.” He turned to the table, humming, “Maybe some wooden cups? He can never find anything proper when business partners come for meetings…” Komaeda picked up one of the smaller, rounded cups, “Hey how much are these?”

Hajime nearly tugged Komaeda away at the price, but he nodded thoughtfully, “And that’s for a set of four?”

“Yes sir.”

“And you take credit?” Komaeda was already pulling his wallet out.

Hajime lunged, fingers tangling with Komaeda’s hand, “I’m the one buying…”

“Pay me back half and we’re even.” Komaeda retorted, gently shaking Hajime’s hand off, “It can be a present from both of us. I’ll pay back half for my mother’s gift too.” He paused, “I mean… I’m not being too forceful… am I?”

Hajime wanted to say he was, but Komaeda’s cheeks were stained pink, a stain that was growing darker. Perhaps… this was his way of helping. Hajime shook his head, retracting the thought, “Okay, but you better let me pay you back. Or else.”

Komaeda laughed, “Right, right.”

After purchasing the cups, Komaeda took the bag and thanked the vendor, tugging Hajime towards the stage, “I believe it’s almost time for Hiyoko’s performance?”
Sure enough, people were gathering around the stage, all chatting. Hajime spotted Souda, talking to not only Kuzuryuu, but to Sonia and Tanaka. Walking over, Hajime gave a wave to Sonia and Tanaka, letting Souda finish talking.

“Hello Hajime, Nagito.” Sonia gracefully said.

“Greetings Hinata, Komaeda.” Tanaka tugged on his scarf, “Are you enjoying the sights?”

“Yeah, we are.” Hajime answered, “What about you?”

“I’ve enjoyed sampling some of the delicacies offered at various stands.” Tanaka replied, crossing his arms.

“The dessert stand is simply wonderful.” Sonia piped up, “You must try a fruit tart there.”

Hajime filed that away for later. The stage suddenly lit up and a man in a suit walked out, holding a microphone, introducing himself and Saionji’s act. Clapping with the rest of the people, Hajime waited as a live orchestra walked out, sitting along the side of the massive stage. Gaping, he watched as they started to play, the melody jaunty and bright.

Saionji came out, practically leaping, like a small sprite. Her movements were quick, but held almost a playful charm as she gave small smiles and rapid snaps of her fan. The music started to get louder, brighter, and Saionji moved with a speed Hajime was shocked at. How did she do that in a kimono?

Finally, the music slowed down, stopping gently. Saionji ended with her fan closed, pressed to her chest. Hajime could see her shoulders rising and the pink to her cheeks. She took a bow as everyone clapped. Exiting to the right, soon the stage was dimmed. People started to leave, slipping away, but Hajime followed the others to the side of the stage.

Reporters were already there, crowding around Saionji, questions flying rapidly. Standing a bit away, Hajime watched as Saionji answered until all the questions dried up and security shooed the stray reporters away. Giving a huff, Saionji straightened up the collar of her kimono before she walked over to them.

“Finally, always takes them so long.” She grumbled before brightening, “Well? How did you like it?”

“It was magnificent!” Sonia clapped her hands together, “Truly amazing Saionji!”

“You moved so quickly. I really enjoyed the choice of song.” Komaeda sincerely told her.

“Well yeah… it’s my theme.” Saionji muttered, “ Didn’t you read the pamphlet?”

“Pamphlet?” Hajime blinked, “In the guide?”

“Yeah!” Saionji dug into her kimono sleeve, grabbing it, flipping the book open, “See?” She held it up, “Says right here, under my program time slot!”

Hajime took the guide back, intending on reading it, but he froze, reading the next performance. His eyes widened and he carefully read again, making sure he wasn’t seeing things. No, the words stayed the same, nothing changing.

“Hajime?” Komaeda’s voice was close, “What is… oh…?” His voice raised a bit, “Is that…?”

The announcer’s voice came back, loud and upbeat as he announced the next act. The reaction from
the group was instant. Kuzuryuu swore lightly, Sonia started to move back towards the side of the stage. Tanaka’s eyes widened, rooted in almost a starfish like pose, as Sonia’s hand was still holding his, tugging lightly. Saionji perked up, and Komaeda glanced over, both of their mouths slightly open. Hajime felt like the air was punched out of his lungs.

Mioda opened her mouth and let out a long screech, the ground vibrating with her voice. Hajime felt his body grow heavy, like the sound was sucking his energy, making him heavier and heavier. The strum of her electric guitar somehow blasted along with her voice, which was equally as loud.

“How… is this part of a Japanese Cultural Fair?!” Hajime found himself yelling over the sound, his voice drowning.

“I… got no idea…” Komaeda somehow heard him.

The guitar playing got faster and louder, Mioda’s voice coming to an almost gravelly stop. Suddenly the sound cut flat, like a cord to the guitar was cut. Immediately Hajime felt sound slam back into his skull, like raw hamburger splatting to the ground. A dizziness followed by a rush of blood filled his ears. Everything buzzed, his mind spinning in rollercoaster twists and turns. Tanaka was on the ground, hand on his face. Sonia looked torn between clapping slowly and helping him. Saionji was cheering, jumping up and down.

“Wow! That was a RUSH!” Saionji gleefully proclaimed, “I feel like I went on three high speed rollercoasters at the same time!” She rushed closer to the stage, “ENCORE!” She screamed.

“H-Hiyoko… please…” Hajime tried.

“I… can’t feel my ears…” Souda moaned, “Please no more…”

Horror filled Hajime as Mioda suddenly strung her guitar again, inhaling into the microphone. Hajime braced himself, closing his eyes, waiting for another rush of sound and screaming.

Instead, something soft filled the space, almost mixing with the holes Mioda’s first song had left, weaving smoothly. There was a delicate cadence to Mioda’s voice, almost soothing. Hajime opened his eyes and gaped at the contrast. How… did she do that? How did Mioda produce such contrasting sounds?

The song ended, short but sweet, with a sudden pick up of the guitar. Hajime didn’t have time to prepare himself as Mioda suddenly launched into another soul shattering song.

This… was going to be a long performance…

Hajime felt like the softness from before made the sound more intense. Everything felt like he had dropped from the highest part of the rollercoaster, now coasting on gravity tugging him down to the Earth. By the time the song ended, Hajime’s heart was physically and emotionally drained. Hesitant clapping filled the area, but no one was as enthusiastic as Saionji, who was jumping up and down. Mioda took a bow, and with a flourish, exited the stage.

“I… feel like death…” Souda groaned.

“What the hell was that?” Kuzuryuu gasped.

“The… she devil’s sound…” Tanaka muttered, “Hell unleashed in human form…”

“I don’t think I can move…” Komaeda grasped Hajime’s hand brutally, “Give me a moment.”
“You’re being melodramatic.” Saionji rolled her eyes.

“Perhaps…” Kuzuryuu was now rubbing his head, “We find Koizumi.”

Right. Head splitting performance aside now that Miota was here they had a chance. Looking at Tanaka, Hajime immediately ruled him out. He was still bent over, one hand over his heart, the other hand in Sonia’s. Tanaka wouldn’t be able to talk to Miota any time soon. Kuzuryuu had the right idea. They should get Koizumi and then see what else they could do.

“I’ll go look for her.” Hajime volunteered. “Where did Mahiru go anyways Hiyoko?”

“She was in the back taking photos.” Saionji replied, “If you go… oh wait never mind. Problem solved.”

Hajime looked over. Koizumi was walking up to them, camera in hand. Her complexion looked a little pale, the freckles across the bridge of her nose more prominent. Guess distance didn’t hamper the effects of Miota’s music at all. Good to know.

“Mahiru!” Saionji bounced over, tugging her hand, “Did you enjoy my performance?”

Koizumi leaned over and kissed Saionji lightly before replying, “Yes, I did. I got many pictures. I also… took pictures of Miota’s… performance.” She paled a bit more.

Saionji beamed, “Wasn’t it amazing?! I loved it! Best music ever!”

“…yes… it was interesting.” Koizumi shuffled, “Anyways… she’s here. What do we do?” She looked over at Tanaka, “He doesn’t look like he’s functioning…”

“The… music… has weakened my spirit.” Tanaka retorted.

“So, should we just… go talk to her?” Souda asked, eyes narrowing and body shaking, “Is it safe to talk?”

“You’re so weak.” Saionji glared, stomping her foot a bit, “Avoiding her won’t get us anywhere. We need to talk to her so we can know what she remembers. You know, just like we always do.”

Of course, Saionji was right. Hajime exhaled. It should be easy enough for them to talk to Miota. They didn’t need Tanaka with them, just use him as an excuse to start a conversation... yeah that was a plan. Why were they always complicating everything? Giving a firm nod, Hajime exhaled. Miota wasn’t in sight. Where could she be? Hajime glanced to the side where Saionji had her interviews. Not there… was Miota already swept away by reporters? Or had she returned to the back, recuperating until her next performance? Maybe it was more complicated than Hajime thought… they could go visit Pekoyama…?

“Well we can’t all go.” Souda’s voice rang, “It would look weird. I think only a few of us should go. I vote Hajime.” He pointed, “He’s good at this sort of thing.”

“I volunteered earlier already…” Hajime muttered, “It’s not that big a deal…”

“No… I want to go!” Saionji huffed, “I can talk to her and figure out what she remembers!”

“I guess that means I should go along too.” Koizumi sighed, a small smile dancing underneath.

That settled it. Hajime looked over at Komaeda. They could just wander around, perhaps find his
parents and give the presents…

“Hello!!!” A bright, cheery voice smacked Hajime in the ears.

Mioda stood by them, arms crossed, her foot tapping, but a bright smile on her face. Now that she was up close, Hajime could see how bright her outfit was. The neon popped on the black and the silver looked almost metallic. Her ears were also shining, spikes lining the edges. How much did those hurt? Hajime tilted his head to see how many piercings she had, but stopped himself now was not the time. Mioda had come up to them on her own… no seeking or plans needed.

“Uh… did you not hear Ibuki?” She tilted her head, arms uncrossing, waving a hand, “Hello?”

Saionji was the first one to snap into place, her eyes sparkling, “Oh wow, hello. I enjoyed your performance. It was so amazing!”

Mioda grinned wildly, “Ibuki always enjoys hearing feedback from fans.” She gave a wide smile, “However…” She walked over, practically bouncing, “I heard something about… seeing what I remember?”

Oh. Crap. Hajime swallowed harshly, a knot in the back of his throat forming. She… heard them? That… was not good. How did they explain this one? They hadn’t had a mix up like this since Souda met Sonia. If they didn’t say something soon…

“That means all of you have the dreams too, yes?” Mioda finished laughing, looking over at Tanaka, “You too Gundham? It’s about time too.” She let out a loud laugh, boisterous and warm.

Wait… that meant… Hajime felt the words slowly sink into his brain, like broken glass sinking into the sole of a foot. About time… she remembered… and had for a while.

“So, wait…” Souda spoke, “You remember? Like everything?”

“Naturally Ibuki remembers everything!” She gave a snort, hands on her hips.

“How long have you carried this knowledge?” Tanaka asked, still gripping Sonia’s hand.

“Uh…” Mioda hummed, “Since… forever?” She shrugged, “I don’t know. It’s been a long time!” She laughed again.

Tanaka stared at her, eyes wide. Hajime found himself staring too. If that was true, Mioda possibly remembered longer than any of them. How much did she remember? Time frame was one thing, but the pieces… Hajime narrowed his eyes. Mioda could help them piece together everything.

“Oh, there you are Mioda-san!”

A woman bustled over, hair neatly pulled back, clothes ironed and pressed, “Your next show is starting in fifteen minutes. Time is key to a successful show.”

“Is it that time already?” Mioda blinked owlishly, “But… Ibuki just met with old friends…” She pouted, but perked up a moment later, turning to all of them, “Sorry, but the show must go on, or so they say.” She grinned, “I’ll talk to all of you later!”

With that, Mioda sped off, leaving the woman sighing, giving them a small bow before she walked away.

“So… that just happened…” Komaeda muttered, dazed, “It seems Mioda remembers…”
“And has for a while.” Kuzuryuu frowned, “She never gave any indications?” He looked over at Tanaka.

“If she did, I was not aware of the dreams until our paths crossed.” Tanaka replied.

That was fair. “Regardless,” Hajime said, “Mioda remembers, meaning we got a meeting to set up.”

“Oh, great, how shocking…” Saionji huffed.

“I’ll go tell Peko…” Kuzuryuu started to walk away.

“Right… her show.” Komaeda perked up, “We should go too.”

Heading over, Hajime had to squeeze past people, an overwhelming number of people standing around, cameras out. The stage was large and wooden, with gorgeous wall scrolls in the back, and minimal lighting behind. Thick curtains were on either side, obscuring the sides of the stage. Hajime walked around, making sure he mainly had a view of the center, and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. An announcer came out, giving a bit of Pekoyama’s backstory before walking off, letting Pekoyama appear. The crowd gave polite claps as she bowed, her shinai at her side.

With a flurry of motion Hajime was familiar with, Pekoyama started her performance, swiftly moving, never faltering as she danced a silent battle. When she stopped, giving a bow, everyone shifted silently, applause ready. A couple new people walked out, and Hajime saw it wasn’t over yet.

The second person was in the same gear as Pekoyama and the third looked like they were going to referee. Hajime barely had time to register their roles before everything moved. Smacks of wood echoed from the stage as Pekoyama and her opponent danced. When they finished, both bowed, causing everyone to erupt in applause.

“Wow… Peko was amazing.” Hajime said.

“Always is.” Kuzuryuu replied, gaze still focused on the stage.

Komaeda nudged Hajime, grinning, “Perhaps you should go congratulate her… too late…”

Hajime laughed as Kuzuryuu was already half way to the side of the stage. “We’ll give them a moment.”

“Of course,” Komaeda laced their fingers together, “Shall we have some free time together? We can worry about Mioda later.”

That was true. She wasn’t going anywhere any time soon. Hajime nodded, “Okay, free time together.”

~

“Wait… you met Mioda?!” – Mitarai

“It was coincidental, but yes, we did.” – Hajime

“Nothing in this world is a coincidence Hajime!” – Sonia

“So, let me guess… we’re gonna have a meeting?” – Akane
“A meeting is standard… geez…” – Hiyoko

“Just tell me time and place and I will be there!” – Hanamura

“Never fear, for Sonia has graciously volunteered her place as our rendezvous point. If you could
meet at the time and place posted below…” – Tanaka

~

Hajime stared at his phone. The event was still going on. “I guess it got solved.”

“It always does.” Komaeda replied, “Now, our day has been great, this event fun, but I do hope
you’ll join me for dinner at my place?”

“I would never turn it down.” Hajime replied, “Just… let me text Kazuichi so he knows to not wait
up for me.”

~

After June removed their dessert dishes and Hajime felt like his stomach would burst, he reached into
his bag and pulled out the gift, holding it to his chest. A pounding filled his ears as he swallowed,
pushing the small box towards Komaeda’s mother.

“I um… bought you something.” Great… he was a kid again… Hajime tried to look her in the eyes,
but the heat on his cheeks made it a challenge.

“For me?” Her voice raised a bit, “That’s so sweet. Thank you so much Hinata.”

“We also got you something Dad.” Komaeda took the bag out from seemingly nowhere, “I hope you
like them.”

“Thank you Nagito, Hinata.” Uryuu blinked, accepting the bag.

Komaeda shot Hajime a wide grin. Hajime shifted, cheeks still warm, but he found the strength to
look both of Komaeda’s parents in the eyes. “You’re welcome.”

~

Ringing was so common for Hajime to wake up to that he could only groan, wincing at the shrill ring
of his phone. Perhaps, it was time for him to change the ringtone. Making a sleepy mental note about
it, Hajime sat up, flopping over Komaeda, hands fumbling along the night table.

“Ugh… Hajime…” Komaeda moaned into the pillow.

“Sorry Nagito…” Hajime grabbed his phone and answered, “Hello?”

“H-Hajime?” Souda’s voice rang out.

“Kazuichi?!” Hajime felt a shot of panic, icy and warm run through his body, “What happened? Are
you okay?”

Souda gave a jilted laugh, “I’m fine. It’s… Saionji.”

“Hiyoko? What happened to her?”

“She… woke and um… well Koizumi said she tried to throw herself down the stairs.”
“Down the… stairs?” Hajime pieced the words painfully together, like he was drawing letters.

“Koizumi stopped her, of course and well… after Saionji woke up she… phoned Tsumiki. Mitarai then phoned me and I volunteered to pass the message on.”

That… Hajime sunk into the bed, feeling Komaeda nestle into him, stroking his shoulder. Why? Why was this happening again? The weird dreams were bad enough, but waking up almost in a trance… and always trying to harm themselves. It had been so long since something had happened. Hajime wanted to slap himself for being lured into a false sense of security.

“We’ll be over.” Hajime announced, voice falling flat to his ears.

“No, no…” Souda quickly said, “I mean… not that Saionji and Koizumi don’t… appreciate it… but Saionji insists it’s fine… we can see her later.”

Later. The word hurt him. Hajime shut his eyes. He could see Saionji’s reasoning. The high of her performances… the happiness… and now this. Still, it hurt, sitting on the sides, waiting. Hajime wanted to jump up, do something, help the fluttering in his brain, but… he had to respect Saionji’s wishes.

“Okay. Right. Thank you Kazuichi. I’ll be home soon.”

“Ah… okay… but you can take your time too.” Souda fumbled, “See you soon Hajime.”

The line dropped. Hajime set his phone on the side. Komaeda immediately pulled him into a warm embrace, arms holding Hajime close. “What happened to Saionji?”

“She woke up… tried to hurt herself by throwing herself down the stairs.” Hajime muttered, “Same… story.”

“It’s not your fault.” Komaeda reminded him.

“I just… feel like we got too comfortable… we still don’t have all the answers and I feel so dense… like the picture is complete but I can’t tell what it is.”

“Sometimes the most obvious things are the hardest to see.” Komaeda said slowly, “But that doesn’t make us dense. It means we need to look at something at a new angle.”

A new angle… Hajime gave a wavering smile, pulling Komaeda closer, “Thank you.”

“We can visit Saionji later.” Komaeda stroked Hajime’s hair, “Or whenever she’s ready to see people.”

Hajime huffed lightly, his breath ghosting across Komaeda’s neck, “We also need to see Mioda. This next meeting might be a jumble.”

“Shame we can’t just have one massive texting conversation to solve everything.” Komaeda mused, “Saves us the trouble of getting out of bed.” He tightened his grip on Hajime.

“Yeah… shame.” Hajime laughed lightly.

~

Mioda gawked openly at Sonia’s house, touching the couch with light finger tips before throwing herself on it, rolling, “Your house is so nice Sonia!” She beamed.
“Thank you.” Sonia sat down neatly, “I’m just happy we found you. I asked my cousin, but she hadn’t kept up with your tours and…” Sonia flushed, “I mean… you performed at my cousin’s wedding about a year ago…”

“A wedding?” Mioda placed a finger on her chin, tapping, “In summer?”

“Yes!” Sonia replied. “It was really…”

The door bell rang. Sonia stood up, smoothing her skirt, “Ah sorry one moment…”

She returned barely a moment later with Mitarai, Tsumiki, and Hanamura. Hajime sat up, watching as Mitarai and Hanamura walked in calmly, claiming one of Sonia’s massive couches. Tsumiki, however, hovered at the door, hands clutched to her chest. Sonia gave a small nudge and smile, standing beside Tsumiki.

Mioda sat up, blinking for a moment, before she broke out into a smile, extending her hand out and waving brightly, “Hello Mikan!” She paused, “Is it okay for me to call you Mikan?”

“It… is o-okay.” Tsumiki’s hands fell a bit down, fumbling, alternating between her chest and her sides.

“Great!” Mioda swung her legs around, sitting properly, “Sit down!” She patted the couch.

Tsumiki shot a look to Mitarai, one with wide eyes, darting back and forth between Mioda on the couch and Mitarai on the other one. Mitarai gave a nod, motioning their head towards the couch Mioda was on. Tsumiki visibly swallowed and started to move, legs shaking a bit, as Sonia walked with her. They both sat down, Sonia on Tsumiki’s other side, gripping her hand.

“Let’s start.” Sonia said.

At once, Hajime felt his gaze drift over the room. Saionji and Koizumi weren’t here yet… and his heart sunk, brain telling him it was highly likely they wouldn’t come. Hajime gripped his pants. Saionji had her reasons and he respected that, but he couldn’t always sit around waiting. Later he’ll go over, see her. Making a mental note, Hajime focused on the conversation.

“I basically remember everything.” Mioda was saying, “Well everything I can know about the Program.” She delicately put. Tsumiki still winced. “And of course, afterwards…”

Wait. Afterwards? Hajime perked up. After the Neo World Program? There was an after? Of course, he knew the survivors had an afterwards (not one he remembered himself), but an after for everyone? The rest of the room stirred, Tanaka leaning forward.

“You’re suggesting there was an afterwards for everyone?” Tanaka asked.

“Oh… yes?” Mioda cocked her head, “I mean, it was slim… but Hajime made it happen!” She grinned.

He did? Hajime stared, “Wait, sorry, you’re saying after the Program there was an afterwards? But people died.”

“Making whatever goal the Program had obscure.” Pekoyama mused, “Why put us into a Program, have us kill each other…”

“Wait!” Mioda straightened up, staring at Pekoyama, brow furrowed, “You don’t… remember why we were in the Program?”
The room fell silent for all of two seconds before Kuzuryuu stood up, along with Souda and Mitarai. Mioda nearly jumped, scooting into the couch.

“You know why we were in the Program?” Kuzuryuu demanded, “The purpose of it?”

“And the afterwards? There was an after?” Mitarai asked, sitting back down.

“Yes?” Mioda blinked.

Kuzuryuu coughed and sat down, “Sorry… just…”

“No, no it’s fine Fuyuhiko!” Mioda grinned before her smile disappeared. “Basically, the Program was trying to help us not be Ultimate Despair. But a virus got in and then the killing started.”

Hajime waited for Mioda to say more, but she sat, drumming her fingers on her leg.

“Wait that’s it?” Souda asked.

“Yes?” Mioda asked, “It failed… but either way we were Ultimate Despair… it helped us in the end.”

Ultimate Despair. Hajime’s mind flashed to Saionji, the reason she wasn’t present. Trying to hurt herself… that was Ultimate Despair showing? “Wait… so if the Program was supposed to help us why are we waking up strange?”

“What do you mean?” Souda asked.

“Strange?” Mioda looked at him, “What do you mean?”

“I mean… Hiyoko isn’t here because she tried to throw herself down the stairs.” Hajime bluntly said. “Mahiru tried to cut her fingers off… Nagito called himself Servant…”

“It’s worrying.” Sonia added, “We need sleep, but what if we wake up and try…”

“Just talk to them.” Mioda cut her off, shrugging her shoulders, “Problem solved.”

“Wait who?” Hajime blurted out.

“I mean… did you see your… other self?” Mioda’s brow furrowed, “I had dreams like those too. I met another Ibuki… she told me to stop playing my music, change my sound…” She frowned, “I think she broke one of my guitars in a fit.” Mioda shrugged. “So, I told this other Ibuki while she is still me… technically… I can make my own future and I want to play my music. And that was it.”

Hajime waited for Mioda to say more, perhaps about how she had more dreams, but Mioda started to drum her fingers on her leg again. “Anyways… if we got that cleared up… Ibuki wants to see Hajime’s drawings!”

“Hold it.” Owari raised her hand in a stop motion, “That was it? No more weird dreams?”

“Well… I do sometimes dream about the Program and afterwards… but no more waking up breaking guitars.” Mioda confirmed, “Which is good because guitars are expensive.”

“So… you’re telling us… we need to talk to them? To our… Ultimate Despair selves?” Kuzuryuu’s voice was painted with skepticism. “And that will solve everything?”

“Yup!” Mioda cheerfully replied, “Now… about those sketches…”

“Wait, wait, wait…” Souda cut in, “It’s that simple? What about afterwards?”
“…yes?” Mioda blinked, “And afterwards? Well we lived on the island… had bad and good times… the usual.” Her lips twisted, “So… the sketches…”

“Do you think your method would work for us?” Mitarai asked.

“More importantly, how do we actually do the method?” Pekoyama added.

Mioda’s eyes were darting around the room. Her hands shaking a bit, “I… I don’t know?” She blurted out, “I just… that’s what I did?” Her voice got a bit higher at the end. “You can test it out I suppose?”

Test it out? Hajime swallowed. With who? Everyone had reacted badly. Were they supposed to just pick a person, hope for the best, and go for it? Everything had too many variables to just… test it out. Surely, there was no way, and a little more pressing, who would they pick? Everyone had reacted negatively at best. Horrifying at worse. They couldn’t just choose someone and…

“I vote Hajime.” Souda said, hand raised in the air.

“Wait… what?” Hajime shoved his thoughts away.

“Hajime?” Mioda cocked her head and then nodded, “Yeah… okay.”

“Me?” Hajime pointed to himself, “We don’t even know if we can just pick someone and run a test…”

“But like… you in Ultimate Despair was not trying to mutilate himself?” Souda pushed.

“Why did you say that like a question?” Hajime protested. “And besides, I’ve never had one of those… episodes… ever.”

“First time for everything Hajiji.” Owari said.

“Can’t we keep it at… never?” Hajime wished it didn’t sound like a question. “What about someone else? Like… Peko?”

“Peko has sword skills I don’t want to see tested while under some dream walking shit.” Kuzuryuu firmly said.

“Besides, you’ve met Kamukura in your dreams, correct?” Sonia brought up.

“Well…” Hajime felt his heart sink a bit. “Yes…”

“So, you got step one down.” Souda cheered. “And in case you go all weird on us, you got me and Nagito! We will be there… at a distance.”

“All you got to do is talk to Izuru and piece of cake!” Mioda cheerfully said. “Now… that sketchbook please.”

“Sure.” Komaeda grabbed the book off Hajime’s lap, tossing it over.

“Hey wait!” Hajime gave one last struggle, “What am I going to say?”

“Whatever your heart wants.” Mioda replied before opening the sketchbook, “Oh… you even got notes…”

Hajime sighed. Komaeda patted his shoulder, “Sorry love… but don’t worry it will work out… and I
mean if you truly don’t want to try, it’s okay.”

At least Komaeda sounded sympathetic. Hajime let out another sigh, but leaned into Komaeda’s half embrace. It was decided… apparently. No need for another round of debate. He’d just have to try.

“Fine… I’ll do it… but not promises.”

~

Walking the familiar trail to Saionji’s place, Hajime rang the bell, balancing the white cardboard box from the bakery. Komaeda shifted forward, ready to help, but Hajime steadied himself. Stepping back, he waited, hearing the shuffling of walking behind the door.

Koizumi opened it, practically swinging the door open with a violent force. Hajime gave a small smile and wave, ignoring her sigh. She opened the screen door, hand on her hips as she kept the door open.

“I’m not sure if Hiyoko wants visitors…” She bit her lip.

“We understand if she doesn’t want to talk.” Komaeda replied, “We just wanted to bring some baking over… ask how she’s doing.”

Giving a small huff, Koizumi accepted the baking, taking the box out of Hajime’s hands, “Well… it would be rude to just turn you away… one second.”

She left, letting the screen door fall shut. Even though they could walk inside, Hajime waited, giving a glance to Komaeda, who gave a small, reassuring smile. Koizumi returned a moment later, opening the screen door.

“She says it’s okay… but only for a short time.” Koizumi warned, stepping aside.

“Thank you. We won’t be long.” Hajime promised.

Saionji was sitting on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, all the way up to her shoulders. Her neck barely stuck out, along with her hands, which were gripping a mug. When they walked in, she looked over.

“You didn’t have to come.” She muttered into the fabric.

“We wanted to see how you were doing.” Hajime replied, “You look cozy.” Cozy like a blanket burrito.

She paled, not the reaction Hajime was expecting. “I… want limited mobility…” She said, looking down.

Oh. Hajime tried to not wince. Instead he went over to the other seat and sat down, “We bought you cake. With gummies.” He added.

Saionji perked up a little, “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Komaeda assured.

Koizumi nodded, “I’ll go cut it up.”

“So, uh… we had a meeting with Mioda.” Hajime informed, “And she thinks there is a way to stop these… dream walks…?”
Saionji fully perked up, “Is that true? Are you sure she is right?”

“Well, she said it worked for her.” Komaeda answered.

“Explain.”

They did, talking well into Koizumi’s return with cake and tea. Hajime barely had time to eat or drink his tea. By the time they finished, the tea was cold and the cake slightly falling apart.

“It sounds like something from a children’s programming.” Saionji said between mouthfuls of cake.

“… and you think that it will work?” Koizumi’s eyebrows were raised.

Hajime gave a shaky smile, “Only one way to find out, right?”

~

“You sure this is going to work?” Hajime found himself repeating later.

Komaeda shrugged, “That’s why we’re calling this an experiment. If it doesn’t work now we’ll try again later.”

Hajime hugged his pillow to his body, sinking into the bed, “What if someone else dreams something and we’re too busy focusing on me?”

“That could happen.” Komaeda nodded, “But you are the one who keeps track of all the dreams, so if anyone will dream something it would be you.” He lightly tossed the sketchbook onto the bed, “Look at that again.”

Hajime shifted, sighing, and picked the sketchbook up, “I’ve looked at this a dozen times today.”

“Look a dozen plus one then.” Komaeda answered, plopping down on a chair, “I’ll still be here.”

Opening the sketchbook, Hajime trailed his fingers along one of the drawings, “You don’t have to stay up for something that might not happen.”

Komaeda rolled his eyes, “We’ve been over this. Just look at the sketchbook and go to sleep.”

Hajime bit his lip, but turned back to the sketchbook, flipping almost absentmindedly through the book. Drawing after drawing passed, registering briefly in his mind, the pieces fitting together. Some point in time, Komaeda dimed the room’s lights and Hajime found himself lying sideways, looking at the sketchbook. Flipping through a few more pages, Hajime found the pictures blurring, lines weaving into one another before his eyes closed.

~

They were back in the colourless room, neutral and grey tones surrounding them. Hajime stood up, walking away from the table. Kamukura eyed him as Hajime moved closer until he was standing beside Kamukura. The room felt stuffy, humid with anticipation dripping down his arms. His tongue felt dry and heavy. Suddenly Hajime felt like the floor was slowly crumbling at his feet. He had no plan, nothing thought out. What words would he say? Was it as easy as Mioda said?

“Will you accept me?” Kamukura suddenly asked.

Hajime jerked back, hands clammy at his sides, “I...”
“Isn’t that what this is? You, asking me to leave you?” Kamukura dully asked. “Just like Mioda?” He stood up, “How boring. She let her other self be a part of her…”

Kamukura touched Hajime’s shoulder. Again, the room began to seep colour, webbing upward, like water soaking into fabric. The hot, molten spear stabbed Hajime’s stomach again, inserting a spike of uncertainty so strong it morphed into shivers, into his hand twitching up, wanting to push Kamukura away. Hajime dryly swallowed and flinched, stepping away a bit. Kamukura’s mouth twitched downward. Before Hajime could speak, the uncertainty shifted entirely into bone shaking pain. A scream wanted to escape his throat. Suddenly the grip was too hot, burning, hurting… Kamukura was fading slightly, more of him becoming see through. A mirror appeared behind them, showing Hajime’s left eye turning red, the right one doing the same, the red nearly touching the pupil.

“Don’t… struggle.” Kamukura’s voice slowly registered, “Hajime…”

The red completely over took. Hajime stared at himself, at the two red eyes looking back at him. The room wasn’t colourful anymore, rather all the colour was muted, dull. Slowly everything began to crumble, the room wasting away slowly… bit by bit…

Kamukura touched the mirror, the hanging mirror and sighed.

~

Kamukura woke to Komaeda, staring at him from across the room. A bit of moonlight shone through the thick curtains, but the main source of light was a small desk lamp at Komaeda’s side. The book he was reading immediately dropped to his lap, followed by on the chair as he stood up. A clock hanging on the wall read a little past three in the morning. Kamukura ran his hands through his (Hajime’s) short hair and sat up.

“Hajime?” Komaeda was walking over, “How are you…?”

“Not Hajime.” Kamukura corrected him, shutting his eyes.

Memories, only from a short while, filled Kamukura’s head. They had met Mioda… wanted to see if what she did would work for the rest of them… Kamukura opened touched the sketchbook, feeling the rough cover under his fingers. This was an experiment… to see if the dreams really would stop. If only Hajime hadn’t struggled. Kamukura held a sigh.

“Not… Hajime?” Komaeda repeated before crossing his arms, “So, who are you?”

Kamukura’s mouth twitched a bit, “Accepting so easily.”

“Not an answer.” Komaeda pushed. “Or are you waiting for me to introduce myself first?”

“How boring.” Kamukura shook his head, “You’re Komaeda Nagito.”

“Well then, introduce yourself.” Komaeda continued, “Since you know who I am.”

“Kamukura Izuru.” He replied simply.

“Nice to meet you.” Komaeda sat on the end of the bed, “I take it, since you’re here, our experiment…”

“Failed.” Kamukura cut him off.
“So… how long do I get the pleasure of your company?” Komaeda asked, eyebrow raised.

Sarcasm… Kamukura ignored it. “Who knows?”

Chapter End Notes

Kidnapped: Couldn't help but add in stuff mentioned in actual FTE.

Shinai: Bamboo sword used in kendo.

Obi: The ornate sash to kimono.

Cups: Common in Japanese businesses to serve tea and a small snack when visitors come.

Mioda: YAY I AM SO HAPPY. SHE'S HERE.
What Is Wrong?

Chapter Notes

SORRY FOR BEING SO LATE WITH AN UPDATE! T_T

I feel like every time I'm apologizing, but for real, this chapter took FOREVER to start. I again had no idea what I wanted and then Kamukura decided to take the chapter over. I tried to inject some... personality into Kamukura, so I hope it worked out decently. He's really difficult to write, so I apologize, but for this chapter I decided to swap between Kamukura's POV and Komaeda's POV.

(Next on my list is the next part to Ties. So, to everyone waiting on that, I'm so, so sorry... I got it planned out so all I need to do is sit and write...)

Thank you to everyone who has supported me through this story. Sometimes I open the document and think "what even am I doing with this?", but then your support gives me strength.

Feel free to leave kudos and comments, they make my day. Anyways, enough of my rambling. I hope you all enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nagito sat in silence for a long stretch of time. Hinata, or rather Kamukura had looked away the moment their conversation ended, fingers fiddling with the fabric before falling limply. What should he do? Going to sleep now felt impossible; Nagito’s body stiff and his mind frayed as he could only stare at Hinata and wonder when he’d be back. Kamukura didn’t know how long it would be, but judging from the previous experiences, it wouldn’t last more than a day. His, in fact, was one of the longer ones, Kuzuryuu’s experience perhaps a bit longer. Seeing Hinata, but deep down understanding it wasn’t him left Nagito’s mind spinning around in circles.

Kamukura shifted and Nagito shoved his thoughts away, watching as Kamukura stood up, brushing the air behind his shoulder before frowning and letting the hand flop to his side. Nagito stood up, the words caught on his tongue. It was both too early to be up, but too late to attempt sleep. He wobbled a little, his brain fuzzy and his body cold. Nagito shivered, rubbing his arms, feeling his body sway, his eyes droop.

“Go to sleep.”

Kamukura was close, Nagito could smell the shampoo and body wash Hinata had used the night before. It sent his mind spiralling, screaming how the person in front of him was Hinata, while his rational voice chanted steadily, reminding him it wasn’t.

“What?” Nagito managed to ask.

“You’re swaying.” Kamukura pointed out dryly, “Go to sleep.”

Nagito blinked rapidly, straightening up, “I’m fine.”

Except the bed was calling to him, luring him with promises of warm covers, a moment to shut off
his brain, and fall into the bliss of sleep invaded Nagito’s mind. His body shivered again, systems shutting down slowly, making the pull to sleep stronger. Nagito pinched himself. He was fine. Just a cup of coffee and he’d be good.

“Moron.”

Nagito looked up to see Kamukura standing close to him, a hand out. Without a pause or time for reaction, Kamukura pushed Nagito towards the bed. Flailing, Nagito tried to struggle, but the push helped his sleepiness and next thing he knew he was lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and Kamukura, who had crossed his arms.

“If you’re worried I’ll be gone, don’t be.” He muttered, “I won’t leave this room until you wake up.”

His words were empty. Nagito didn’t know what kind of person Kamukura was. He had no guarantee that Kamukura would keep his promise, but the covers seemed to melt around him, forming around his body. The residual heat left from Hinata lingered along with his smell and Nagito found himself fall asleep painfully fast, gaze still focused on Kamukura as his eyes shut and sleep took him.

~

Kamukura waited until Komaeda was sleeping, chest evenly rising, breathes coming out in short huffs, before he half heartedly threw the covers over him. Not that he particularly cared, but Hinata would. Whenever Hinata came back. Kamukura walked over to where Komaeda was sitting before and sat down, picking up the book Komaeda was reading. It wasn’t a novel. It was Hinata’s sketchbook. Kamukura flipped it open absentmindedly thumbing the pages as he went, tapping his fingers along the edges. Hinata’s writing was neat and always off the side or below the picture. The accuracy of the events was impressive, but Kamukura hoped they would be. With so many people contributing to the events, someone better have something right.

When his eyes fell on a picture of him, sitting watching a city burn, Kamukura stopped turning and stared. The memory welled up inside of him with ease, like puss out of a healing wound. He could taste the ash and smoke. It always had a fatty layer, from the numerous of corpses burning every day. He could still hear the constant sound of explosives and screaming as insanity took hold, firmly destroying everything held dear.

Holding the page with a finger as a make shift bookmark, Kamukura flipped through the rest, seeing the Program well documented, but many of their Despair days left out. There were a few, some with more questions beside the sketches, like Saionji’s leg being broken. Kamukura didn’t need to shut his eyes to hear her scream as she forced one of the many Despair induced goons to take a sledge hammer to her kneecap.

Picking up the pencil case lying beside the book, Kamukura zipped it open, pulling out a pencil. Twirling it, Kamukura started to lightly sketch, the movements both natural and artificial at the same time, like he was pulling at an unused muscle.

This was pathetic, he shouldn’t have to give them clues to memories that should be kept sleeping. Why everyone was throwing themselves head first into a past life that was just that, a past life, was beyond him. But because of that he was here now, in Hinata’s body, able to feel and touch for the first time in a long while.

He might as well give them a gift as thanks.

~
Nagito woke to the sun slowly streaming in and Kamukura still in the room, sitting in his chair. Sitting up, Nagito immediately got out of bed, wincing at the cool air, and stumbled over. The sketchbook was shut at his elbow and the pencil case neatly where Nagito had left it. Did Kamukura really sit through the hours doing nothing but look at him? Nagito flushed a little and hoped he did something else.

“Good morning?” Nagito tried. “You… stayed.”

“I said I would.” Kamukura huffed.

Well… Nagito chewed his lip, “Kazuichi is here too.”

“I’m aware. I heard him move through the night.” Kamukura stated calmly.

Oh… Nagito stopped chewing his lip and forced himself to stand upright, “Let’s get changed before we eat something.”

He immediately went to take his shirt off, but Kamukura’s eyebrow raise stopped him, Nagito revealing half his stomach. Nagito blinked, but hands remained frozen at the hem of his shirt.

“Oh… Hajime keeps his clothing in the closet?” Nagito tried, “I’m slowly and silently carving out an area for my stuff, but I don’t know if he’s noticed yet.”

Kamukura sighed, “I’m aware of where everything is. I need not look to figure that out.”

... Nagito held his tongue. Then… what was the problem? Was Kamukura strangely shy about going through Hinata’s stuff? It was a bit strange to consider that, but he supposed it was a plausible reaction…

“I’m just perplexed that you’d start changing in front of a stranger.” Kamukura said, cutting Nagito’s thoughts off.

Oh… oh… Nagito flushed. He… hadn’t thought of that. Even though Kamukura was here, it was Hinata staring at him. Nagito dropped his shirt. “I’ll go change in the bathroom.” He muttered, scooping up his clothes, exiting the room.

He barely made it out when Souda immediately intersected him in the hallway, eyes wide. Nagito almost dropped his clothes when Souda rushed over, grabbing his shoulders.

“How did it go?” He asked breathlessly.

“Kamukura is currently here.” Nagito answered, “He’s probably changing now.”

Souda paled, “Kamukura… so it didn’t work?” He frowned, “When will we get Hajime back?”

“No idea.” Nagito sighed, “But Kamukura isn’t doing anything or has attempted anything.”

Souda let out a visible sigh before his eyes caught Nagito’s clothes, “You’re not dressed?”

“I was informed that stripping in front of a stranger isn’t something one does.” Nagito snipped.

“Oh…” Souda stepped back, “Right… uh… I’ll leave you to that. I’ll go… make coffee.”

He scuttled off. Nagito held his sigh and made a small note to make sure Souda didn’t think he was upset at him. Stepping into the bathroom, Nagito mindlessly changed, folding his sleep wear neatly. He then took the time to wash his face and comb out his hair.
When he returned to the bedroom, Kamukura was changed, still standing where Nagito had left him. The bed was also made. How... thoughtful of Kamukura. Putting his sleep clothes neatly on top of the neatly straightened sheets, Nagito also grabbed his phone.

“Kazuichi’s awake. Let’s go make breakfast.”

Silence, all the way to the kitchen, where Souda had already put the coffee maker on and was rummaging through the drawers. A frying pan sat on the counter and a bunch of containers for flour and sugar.

“Kazuichi?” Nagito called out.

Souda nearly slammed his head on the open cabinet door. He whipped around, hair a bit askew, “Oh hey Nagito, Kamukura?” He tilted his head, “I was thinking of making pancakes.”

Nagito jumped at the distracting task. “Okay, I think Hajime bought some maple syrup…” He went to a different cabinet, rummaging.

“So…” Souda started, “Hello? Do I need to introduce myself?”

“I’m aware of who you are.” Came Kamukura’s reply.

“Oh… from Hajime’s memories?” Souda mildly asked, “Or your memories?”

“… both… in a way.”

Souda chuckled warmly, “Well, for the record I’m Souda Kazuichi. Nice to meet you Kamukura.”

Nagito set the maple syrup on the counter. This... wasn’t stilted... that was good. His mouth twitched into a small smile. “Kazuichi, where are the rest of the ingredients?”

“Oh, ah… right here…”

“… I can help.”

Nagito turned around. Kamukura was making his way to the cabinets, without prompting to where things were, and pulled out bowls and the electric mixer. Was this from Hinata’s memories aiding him, or did he just guess correctly? Nagito paused. Did it matter? Beyond the strangeness of having someone else’s conscious inside his boyfriend’s body, Kamukura was still thrown into a strange situation.

“Thank you.” Nagito said softly.

Kamukura turned and for a moment, Nagito saw his eyes widen, before his expression turned neutral. He turned away and Nagito took it as a sign to move on. Mentally going through the list of things on the counters, Nagito began to measure out the dry ingredients, placing them into a large mixing bowl. Souda had started on the wet ingredients and soon they had a batter, smooth and thick, ready to cook. Nagito carefully tested the heat before he ladled a few pancakes, watching them carefully for bubbling before checking the bottom so he wouldn’t burn them.

“Move aside.” Kamukura suddenly said.

Nagito barely let out a squeak when Kamukura snatched the flipper and with ease flipped the pancakes with a rather high arch. Nagito blinked.

“You’re rather good.”
“It’s a pancake.” Kamukura replied.

“Still impressive, regardless of what you’re cooking.” Nagito countered.

Kamukura huffed and continued to cook the pancakes, setting the finished ones on a plate. When he was done, he shut the burner off and carried the plate to the table. Souda had already set the table, the bottle of maple syrup and cups of coffee present. Thanking them both, Nagito sat down and took a few pancakes, drizzled them with syrup, and began to eat.

“So, are you going to text everyone?” Souda asked as he drowned his pancakes with the maple syrup.

Nagito swallowed and looked at Kamukura, who was sipping his coffee, “We have to let them know what happened.” Nagito replied. “Though… do you want to meet them?” He directed at Kamukura.

“… I have an option?” Kamukura calmly asked, snatching the syrup from Souda. “Strange, I assumed you’d march me over regardless.”

“We’re not terrible people.” Souda said for Nagito, “It’s up to you.”

“Just let me know soon?” Nagito requested, “I’m going to text everyone now.”

Nagito pulled his phone out and waited, setting it on the table. A small voice told him that could be pressuring Kamukura, but Nagito shut it down. There was no way Kamukura would feel pressured by the presence of his phone. With the way he was acting, Nagito was certain Kamukura wouldn’t hesitate to give an honest answer.

“Fine.” Kamukura said suddenly.

It took Nagito a full moment to comprehend what he heard. “You… want to meet them?”

“They’ll want to meet me.” Kamukura replied, stabbing a piece of his pancake, “I want to get this over with. Curiosity is the most predictable force on this planet.”

When he put it like that… it made meeting everyone an obligation, not a genuine desire. Nagito held his tongue. No need to argue with Kamukura. Instead Nagito picked his phone up and quickly typed out a group message.

~

Kamukura stared at Sonia’s house. Komaeda and Souda hadn’t said where they were going, but one look at the area and design of the house and he immediately drew the conclusion. A well-kept garden was slowly starting, green returning to the world. By next week Kamukura was sure the tulips would start blooming.

The others were in the sitting room, minus Koizumi and Saionji. Some were upright, twirling their shirts or in Tsumiki’s case, her skirt. Others, like Kuzuryuu were slightly slouched, as though the tension was dragging them to the center of the room. Some snacks sat out on the coffee table, but they were untouched, same with tea that Kamukura was sure went cold a while ago.

“Nagito, Kazuichi!” Sonia immediately stood up, smoothing her skirt, “Hello.”

“Hey,” Souda gave a small wave and walked inside, breaking away from them.

“Hello everyone.” Komaeda said, but didn’t move.
Kamukura didn’t wait. He stepped inside, feeling everyone’s gazes follow him, like a cat following a laser pointer on the ground. Making his way to an empty couch, Kamukura sat, eyeing the room. It was no coincidence that the couch empty was the one furthest from the door and angled so everyone else could see him. Rather pathetic, but fears often were. It was eating away at everyone, similar to a flesh-eating parasite. Kamukura could see everyone shift, looking at each other, words held, waiting for someone to start.

Pathetic.

“You wished to meet me, yet have nothing to say.” Kamukura stood up, “If that’s all, I’ll excuse myself.”

“Sit your ass back down.” Kuzuryuu immediately snapped, “We haven’t started.”

Kamukura sat down, eye brow slightly raised, “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Whatever.” Kuzuryuu huffed, folding his arms over his chest, “So, how long are you going to hang around?”

“Didn’t Komaeda tell you everything?” Kamukura shot back, “I already mentioned I have no idea.”

“So… you just took over Hajime-chan’s body?” Mioda asked, waving her hand in the air like she was in class. “Was that like… your ultimate evil plan? I’ve read stories where that’s what happens.” She added sagely.

Kamukura’s eyebrow slightly twitched, “You’re suggesting this was intentional, my presence here.”

“S-she’s right.” Tsumiki added, “W-what happened to Hinata?”

“Isn’t it clear?” Tanaka proudly asked, “This fiend, sheathed in dreams and hidden fears pounced upon Hinata in his sleep and whisked control away. Owari is correct; your presence is no mere blip in the fabric of reality.”

…Kamukura sighed, but if he didn’t say something they’d keep flailing around with baseless accusations. “Again,” He slowly said, “My presence isn’t enough to suggest this was intentional or planned.”

Tanaka opened his mouth, along with Owari who was standing up, but Mitarai cut in clearly, their voice level.

“I think it’s too early to jump to conclusions. You’re suggesting that obviously your being here isn’t enough to say if this was planned, but it is enough to suggest something went wrong in our experiment.” They said.

Silence. Then the room exploded.

“Yeah, well the thing that went wrong was Kamukura taking over Hajime’s body!” Owari proclaimed.

“I concur with that statement!” Tanaka added.

“Now, now… maybe it’s too early to say that…” Hanamura was laughing was jilted.

“Look, I’m just suggesting…” Mitarai started.
“I think… Mitarai may have a point.” Pekoyama firmly said.

“B-but… this still doesn’t answer where Hinata is…” Tsumiki’s voice was almost drowned out.

“Tsumiki has a point…” Sonia quietly mused, “What do you think Nagito?”

“Well I…”

Before Nagito could finish, Kuzuryuu stood up, fists balled at his sides, “Could you all SHUT THE FUCK UP!!”

His voiced echoed in the room. Immediately Owari and Tanaka turned and shot glares, while Tsumiki curled closer to Mitarai, eyes wide. Hanamura was caught between laughing and screaming. Sonia blinked and covered her mouth with her hands. Komaeda looked down, biting his lip. Only Mioda and Pekoyama blinked owlishly, though Pekoyama’s held understanding in her eyes.

Kuzuryuu coughed, “Arguing like this isn’t getting us anywhere.” He whipped around to look at Kamukura, “Mitarai is correct, yes? Something went wrong last night. What happened to Hajime?”

This… Kamukura wanted to sigh, but staying silent was boring. Explaining was boring too. He opted for the middle, “Your experiment, what did it need?”

Souda groaned, “You’re making us figure this out? It’s easier to just tell.”

“That would be boring.” Kamukura countered.

Komaeda however opened his mouth, brow slightly furrowed, “Hajime needed to accept you, to not let the idea of you control him. You’re saying he failed to do that?”

“Correct.” Kamukura huffed. It was about time.

“What the hell?” Owari jabbed her finger in his direction, “So in order to get Hajiji back, he needs to accept you?”

“No idea.” Kamukura shrugged, “Possibly. Or he could just take control back on his own.”

“Okay… so… hurry and go to sleep then!” Mioda cheerfully pointed to the couch, “I can sing you a lullaby.”

Tanaka paled considerably. Sonia rubbed his arm.

“I don’t think the couch is the most comfortable place.” Mitarai reasoned.

“M- Maybe o-one of the g-guest rooms?” Tsumiki softly asked, “I-If that’s o-okay?” She looked at Sonia.

Something small pinched inside of Kamukura. His lips pulled down slightly, fingers grazing his chest for a moment before his hand fell down to his lap. Logically, sleep was the answer for Hinata to come back, probably easier to access through dreams.

Kamukura stood up. It was what they wanted, another experiment, only this time to get Hinata back. “Very well. I’ll accept your offer. Though… I don’t require singing.” He added.

Mioda deflated a little, but Sonia stood up, “I’ll show you to them. If you’d follow me?”

They exited the room, no one else following them. Kamukura mindlessly mapped Sonia’s house as
they made their way up a grand staircase. Walking down a hall, Sonia opened one of the doors, revealing a plush, western style room.

“Here, is this satisfactory?” Sonia asked, “Do you require anything else?”

“This is fine.” Kamukura walked in and sat on the bed.

Sonia hovered at the door, “You… sure it’s not too early?” She asked, “You were just sleeping. I…” She bit her lip, “I was just wondering if we should hold this off is all…”

What was this? “Don’t you want Hinata back?” Kamukura dully asked her.

“Well… yes…” Sonia answered, eyes wide, “But that doesn’t mean I want you gone immediately.”

Kamukura held back a snort. Sonia’s hands were neatly clasped in front of her, her gaze steady, eyes still wide with anticipation for his answer. Kamukura leaned back a little.

“I see… it’s a good thing you kept this honesty private. It would have caused another argument downstairs…”

“It’s not that.” Sonia cut him off, “They’re just afraid.

“Naturally so.” Kamukura rolled his eyes, “I’m unknown and in the body of their friend. They’d be foolish to not be afraid of me.”

“No, no, not that.” Sonia stepped inside. Before Kamukura could respond she sat on the bed, pulling his hands into her own, brow furrowed, “Just… listen to me please?” She requested, “They’re not afraid of you, but rather afraid for Hajime. We don’t know if he’s safe.”

“The possibility of his safety is high.” Kamukura replied, “Logically speaking this is no different than the other encounters from before. The difference is I’m not grabbing a knife immediately.”

“Fear isn’t logical.” Sonia’s hands gripped his tightly, “And… you’re not being forthcoming. Fear is merely the result of uncertainty and lack of knowledge. We’re already uncertain, but you’re not helping matters.”

…So, he was to coddle them? Tell them everything was fine? Give a speech about how they’d work together? That was what terribly written shows did as a trope. Sonia pouted, as though she read his mind and let go of his hands.

“Look, we don’t want you to lie to us. We just want to understand what is going on with Hajime as well as ourselves.”

Understand. Kamukura got that. The pursuit of knowledge was what drove humanity forward, even if that direction was dark or questionable. He could see what Sonia was saying, logically mapping everything out in an instant. That didn’t mean it was his job to solve everything for everyone. He wasn’t here to just be an exposition box until Hinata returned.

“So,” Sonia stood up, “If you want to try bringing Hajime back, please do. This room is for your use. However, if you can’t or don’t feel it is the right time, instead of being obtuse, try to help us understand what is happening.”

She left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. The moment she left, Kamukura flopped back onto the bed. This was ridiculous. Fear was the opposite of understanding. Paranoia and phobias lacked logic, consuming people rapidly. To think, they actually wanted to understand was an optimistic
notion from Sonia.

Closing his eyes, Kamukura evened his breathing, letting himself slowly fall into a light state, mind slowly wandering towards Hinata.

~

The room. The same colourless walls, the same table. Neutrality was everywhere, creating a dense layer upon layer of silence, sound unable to pierce the walls. Hinata was sitting at the table, legs curled up, his face buried in his knees.

Kamukura wasted no time. He walked over and grabbed Hinata’s arm, pulling Hinata up, making him stand, making their eyes catch. Hinata’s gaze was almost glassy, but immediately snapped when he saw him.

“How…” He started.

“Not even a day.” Kamukura answered the boring question, “Let’s just get this over with.”

Hinata blinked, “Wait, what?”

“Your friends want you back.” Kamukura hated how he had to spell it out, say the words aloud, make them tangible. “So, don’t struggle with me. We were once apart, then we were one after the Neo World Program. Our last experiment failed because you were rejecting me. It shoved me forward because you feared the pain and retreated inside.”

“You’re being awfully chatty.” Hinata muttered.

“It’s because none of you can piece these things together.” Kamukura dully pointed out, “Let’s just get this done Hinata.”

Tightening his grip on Hinata’s arm, Kamukura evened his breathing out, feeling Hinata tense under his touch, before he too evened his breathing out. The room wobbled and Kamukura felt his self slowly disintegrate. Hinata’s gaze was slowly glazing over and his left eye turning red. Good. This was too much of a hassle… everyone’s worries over Hinata… Sonia’s words… how foolish.

Suddenly Kamukura felt a stab of pain in his arm, hot, burning, eating away at his flesh. He let out a small gasp and stared as the red from Hinata’s eye, slowly bled out. Kamukura tried to pull away, touch Hinata, shake him out of it, but the moment he tried Kamukura felt the heat stab him harshly, seeping into his body. What was happening?

“Hinata… I said don’t struggle.” Kamukura snapped, “Hinata…”

Hinata’s gaze snapped back, He stared at Kamukura, eyes wide, “Your… eyes… is this supposed to happen?”

What did he mean? Kamukura opened his mouth, but the room slowly broke around them in large chunks, like rocks splitting with jagged lines. The walls fell harshly to the floor, crumbling and cracking further upon impact, debris spreading around their feet. Mirrors hung everywhere where the walls used to, reflecting everything back. Kamukura stared at his reflection. His eyes… they weren’t red… they were turning green, like Hinata’s eyes…

~

Kamukura sat up, panting, sweat on his brow. He clung to the silk of Sonia’s sheets, wishing they
were heavier to keep his body from swaying. The room was blurring at the edges, but Kamukura forcibly closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breathes, making his breathing even. His body stopped swaying and his fingers loosened on the sheets. Forcing his legs to move, Kamukura stood up and glanced at the clock. It was about two hours; everyone could still be around. Straightening his shirt, Kamukura first ducked into the bathroom, the harsh light making him blink a few times to adjust. His eyes, or rather, Hinata’s eyes stared back at him, closer to a brown than the vivid green in the dream.

Touching the skin under the eye, Kamukura huffed. This was ridiculous. Why didn’t it work this time? It couldn’t be Hinata’s fault, could it? Last time, when Hinata had struggled his eyes remained red in the dream. This time, it was his eyes that turned green. If Hinata hadn’t been the one to struggle that had to mean…

The sound of glass breaking filled the room, followed by a sharp pain in his hand. Kamukura looked down, at the glass sticking in the side of his hand. Gingerly he pulled a rather large shard out, wincing as the glass cut into his skin more on the way out. Still, it didn’t compare to the pain in his mind, the realization churning over and over. Focusing on picking out the majority of the larger glass shards, Kamukura walked out of the bathroom and towards the sitting area.

To his confirmed guess, he could hear the voices of everyone in the sitting room. No one had left. Kamukura almost stopped walking. He scowled at his feet. Why was he hesitating? Mistakes were part of the world. No one was immune to them. Sure, he was still here, but he’d figure it out and get Hinata back.

Like they wanted.

He forced himself to walk into the room Immediately the chatter stopped, though Tsumiki let out a gasp as her trained eye focused on his hand. She bolted up, smoothly gliding through the room.

“H-Hinata, your hand.” She firmly pointed out.

“Sorry,” Kamukura addressed the room as Tsumiki took his hand.

“It’s okay,” Sonia smiled, “I can replace a mirror easily Hajime.”

Kamukura rolled his eyes, “No. I mean sorry, I’m not Hajime.”

Everyone shifted, their bodies drawing up, shoulders closer to their necks, legs crossing, arms curling inwards. Kamukura wished they were better at hiding things, even Pekoyama adjusted her stance at his words.

“R-regardless.” Tsumiki swallowed, her grip tightening, “I’m going to look at your hand.” She led him to the couch, placing him beside Sonia. “Where is your first aid kit?”

“I’ll get it.” Sonia said, standing up.

No one moved while Sonia was gone. Even Tsumiki sat frozen, her gaze fixed on his hand. When Sonia returned, she returned with a small white box. Tsumiki accepted it and with a twist of gloves on her hands, she began to pick out the smaller shards with tweezers.

“So, what went wrong?” Pekoyama finally asked. “Is Hajime all right?”

“He’s fine.” Kamukura huffed at the obvious questions, “The process rejected.”

“Again?” Kuzuryuu interrupted, “Did you explain to Hajime or not?”
“I…” Kamukura felt his cheeks heat slightly. Why was it hard to say? “I am at fault.”

“You?” Komaeda blinked, “You’re saying… you’re the one to reject Hajime?” He frowned, “You said fear was what made Hajime reject you, so is it the same this time?”

His question pierced Kamukura. Was it the same? He averted his gaze and looked at Tsumiki, who had all the bloodied glass shards in a plastic bag. She was moving on to disinfecting. It couldn’t have been fear. He wasn’t afraid of Hinata. Being one with Hinata wasn’t scary, it was logical and necessary. So, why was he at fault this time?

“Perhaps, you have something you want to do?” Sonia suggested, “Like a disembodied spirit, you want to complete something before you go?”

“…are you serious?” Souda tilted his head, “So it’s like… we got to do things together?”

What? Kamukura almost jerked his hand out of Tsumiki’s grasp. That… couldn’t be it. That was a cliché on top of a cliché. The oldest story telling trope with ghosts imaginable, that he didn’t have everything he wanted. No, they were wrong. There wasn’t some character changing event he desperately wanted to experience in order to feel at ease.

“You’re ridiculous.” Kamukura bluntly told them, standing up, tugging his now bandaged hand out of Tsumiki’s. “It was a small failing on my part. I’ll go try again.”

At that moment, his stomach rumbled. Kamukura stopped. Across the room Hanamura lit up like a small lamp.

“It appears… we should perhaps break for lunch.” He wasn’t asking. “If you’ll all allow me…”

~

Nagito watched everyone leave the sitting room, Hanamura leading the group, whistling as he walked. The idea for lunch was a welcomed one. The time between pancakes had been longer than anticipated and the snacks Sonia had set out were barely touched. Nagito’s stomach churned, reminding him he had only had tea recently.

Slowly, Nagito stood up and gathered the snack plate, deciding it best to bring the food into the kitchen. Upon entering he spotted Hanamura already pulling things out of cabinets and drawers. Sonia’s staff, Nagito honestly couldn’t remember if he’d ever met them, were clearly not around. For a good reason. He eyed Kamukura, standing off the side, arms crossed, looking out the window. Even if Kamukura wasn’t violent, their strange situation wasn’t something Nagito wished regular people could witness. The added fact that Kamukura was now potentially causing problems in getting Hinata back only made their privacy all the more important.

Though, speaking of Kamukura… Nagito tilted his head, staring at him. Was Sonia correct? It felt logical. Based on their dreams and information, Kamukura was extremely different. He had been his own person, a personality twisted by immoral human experiments, but a person none the less. Was the problem just further demonstrating how defined Kamukura was? Kamukura had scoffed at Sonia’s suggestion, but hadn’t been able to offer up any other explanation. They had nothing to go off of, except Sonia’s idea. Perhaps Kamukura didn’t know what he wanted either? Maybe this was a trial and error for all parties involved. One thing was certain: they wouldn’t figure out by not talking to him.

Nagito walked over, easily planting himself by Kamukura, “So, given any thought to what’s holding you here?”
Kamukura looked at him, eyes narrowed, “I said that’s ridiculous. I’ll just try again later.”

Right. Nagito rolled his eyes, “You aren’t even sure what went wrong.”

“Taking half-hearted guesses won’t solve this either.” Kamukura retorted, “Trial and error hold more of a logical solution than wishful thinking.”

“Wishful thinking?” Nagito caught the words, “What? You think Sonia is being optimistic? I think she has a decent point.”

“Truly?” Kamukura unfolded his arms glaring, “All the evidence up till now concludes everyone wants Hinata back. Your actions will just be means to an end.”

Wasn’t that the point of actions? To get a desired result? Nagito stepped forward. Sure, Kamukura was right; they wanted Hinata back, but criticizing every idea to how to get him back wasn’t going to help. Why was Kamukura being so negative towards the idea? Not acting or trying was just as bad as mere speculation.

At this point, Nagito could feel everyone watching them, their gazes locked on their figures. Even Hanamura, who was watching the stove, was also slightly turned towards them, his gaze catching at the corner of his eyes.

“All I’m saying is, we won’t know until we try.” Nagito countered, “Sure, maybe you’re right and this was a small hiccup and trying again will get Hajime back. However, if that doesn’t work, then we have to consider other options.”

Kamukura straightened his back, eyebrow raised, “You honestly believe a shallow offering of an activity or companionship will be enough?”

Nagito paused. Shallow… was that what it genuinely was? Kamukura’s point drove into his mind. Nagito could suddenly see the logic thrown at him. Not that he had any experience with this, but in general, shows and literature suggested that the event or companionship to ease spirits was personal, something they truly wanted. If they didn’t feel it was real, why would it work? Anything they did would fail so long as Kamukura felt it wasn’t genuine.

“Ah,” Nagito eased a smile on his face. How simple. He really should have seen it clearer, “I understand.”

“Finally,” Kamukura muttered.

“You want the experience personal.” Nagito concluded brightly, “Not just us trying to get Hajime back, but something entirely for you.”

Kamukura jolted up, eyes widening slightly, “You’re… missing the point.”

“I am?” Nagito pondered, tapping his chin with a single finger, “Well, you’ve argued passionately about our efforts being token, only focused on Hajime, so logically this means we should personalize it.”

Silence. Nagito felt a small, smug smile fill his face.

“I suppose arguing with stupidity is useless.” Kamukura finally spoke slowly, “Very well. Be prepared for disappointment.”

“I’ll take that as a challenge.” Nagito countered, “Just you watch.”
The situation had complicated itself further. Kamukura twirled his fork, chewing silently. Chatter was dull, subdued, but it wasn’t like he was trying to actively listen to their conversations. Instead, his mind floated around Komaeda’s words, how he was still clinging uselessly to Sonia’s idea, how everyone was silently clinging to Sonia’s idea.

Ridiculous. He had said it multiple times and he’d say it again. The idea that he wanted something personal out of them churned his stomach and made his chest ache. He wasn’t here to become friends with them; he was here because Hinata attempted to merge and failed due to fear. That was it. That was all it was. Nothing more and nothing less. They had nothing to offer him and he wasn’t looking for anything.

Poking a carrot cut into the shape of a sakura, Kamukura held a sigh. No matter. He’d try again later, get Hinata back, and then everyone could move on from this.

“You were awfully quiet.” Nagito commented the moment they left.

Kamukura didn’t look at him, “Eating doesn’t require talking.”

“Yeah, but this was your chance to see everyone.” Souda said, “Well except Koizumi and Saionji. We could go visit them.” He added.

Nagito beamed. It was a good idea. Kamukura would say no to anything they suggested, “Sure, that sounds great. I’ll text Koizumi now.” He sweetly added, watching Kamukura’s head twitch.

 “…fine.” Kamukura said as Nagito was texting, “I can see when I don’t have an option.”

“Yup.” Nagito cheerfully agreed, hearing his phone chime, “Ah, she says it’s fine.”

“Onward!” Souda whipped his keys out, twirling them as he unlocked the car.

They piled inside, Souda whistling as he fiddled with the heat. Now that spring was edging in, things were warming up. Soon, they wouldn’t need heat, but cooling. Pulling up GPS on his phone, Nagito tapped Souda’s shoulder.

“Turn left once you’re at the intersection out of here.”

“Got it.” Souda confirmed, “Say, how is Saionji doing?”

Nagito could see her, curled inside her blanket, wishing for constriction. She had looked so hopeful when Hinata told her about their experiment, that she might not have to worry about throwing herself down high places. His gut twisted at the image of Saionji deflating at the sight of Kamukura. Sure, Nagito hadn’t withheld any information, but reading something and seeing proof were vastly different.

“Nagito?”

“Uh…” He stuffed the thoughts away, “She was… okay… still a bit shaken…”

“I would be too if I tried to break my leg.” Souda softly muttered.

“Her leg?” Kamukura suddenly said in the back.
Oh, right. Nagito felt a jolt to his brain. Sure, Hinata knew, but they never confirmed what Kamukura remembered from Hinata. He turned around, an explanation on his lips.

“Saionji recently tried to…”

“Break her leg.” Kamukura added, voice dull, “I remember that.”

“I see…” Nagito shut his mouth. No need to explain then…

“I was there when she broke it.” Kamukura continued, “She insisted on being tied to a bed, on stage, a sledge hammer was used.”

Nagito paled and felt the car swerve slightly, Souda’s hands white. “I… uh…”

“She wanted it theatrical. Music, lighting, the whole works.” Kamukura kept talking, his gaze focused on the road they passed.

This was a memory, of their Despair. Nagito knew it was something far away from their reality, but he couldn’t help but shiver, wishing Kamukura never told them. Even though he wasn’t vividly describing it, Nagito could see it all, slowly blooming in his mind.

“I noted you don’t have a lot of your Despair days drawn in the sketchbook.” Kamukura said, as though telling them the memory was a favor, “Is that because you don’t remember it, or because Hinata didn’t want to draw it?”

His question wasn’t digging, it wasn’t laced with expectation of outburst, or satisfaction lurking in the shadows, waiting to lunge and take the kill. Kamukura was talking methodically, detached, like he had read what Saionji had done to herself rather than witness it.

It made the shiver that ran down Nagito’s spine harsher, but it helped him answer, trying to keep his distance.

“I suppose, a bit of both. Perhaps there are some things we haven’t told Hajime.”

Kamukura hummed, letting the topic drop. Nagito looked at the radio, almost wishing they had put music on. Maybe they wouldn’t have even started a conversation…

“So… uh is that all you remember?” Souda suddenly asked, “I mean… just our Despair days? Nothing happy?”

“The world was already crumbling at the hands of Enoshima.” Kamukura surprisingly answered.

“Oh wow…” Souda slowed down, stopping at a light, “That’s harsh…”

Harsh was an understatement. Nagito could see the ruins of cities, the thick smog curling over everything, and feel the pain in his left arm as he sawed it off. He had just wander around aimlessly, living off his luck, relishing and hating the Despair. Nagito couldn’t imagine how it was for the people struggling, not under Enoshima’s influence…

“Despair was boring.” Kamukura suddenly said.

What? Nagito nearly dropped his phone, holding on it barely long enough for the robotic female voice to tell Souda to turn right. Whipping his head around, Nagito stared at Kamukura, who was looking back eyes unblinking. It made Nagito’s heart pound, to see Hinata sitting there, eyes and face neutral as he referred to horrible events without batting an eye.
“W-what?” Nagito’s voice stumbled in the air.

“Despair was boring.” Kamukura repeated.

“But… all those people… what I did…” Nagito clutched his arm so tightly it hurt, “What Saionji did… what everyone else did…”

“I don’t understand.” Kamukura leaned closer, his gaze now focused on Nagito, “Terrible things always happen regardless of time and location. Humans do terrible things to one another, it’s written through history. Tragedy upon tragedy, horror upon horror. Motives are the same, results are the same.”

“You’re saying you didn’t feel anything during all of that?” Nagito pounced, “You just sat there in apathy and watched? Even with all the pain? Did you just sit stoic and watch someone die?”

For the first time since he had arrived, Kamukura’s eyes narrowed darkly, his posture completely straightening up, as though some internal force was drawing him up with string, composing him in the proper position. His eyes pierced through the confined space of the car.

“No.” He slowly said, as though his words were spoken for the first time and he was unsure how to say them, “Not when…” Kamukura paused and then shook his head, “Only once.”

Only once what? Nagito wanted to scream the words. This was different… what was Kamukura trying to say? What was he remembering? The perspective Nagito had and Kamukura was shifting, breaking as it moved, shattering messily. Beyond the coldness, beyond the intelligence, and distain, there was something small inside of him, something fragile. Something Kamukura was trying to cover up, not to bury and forget, but to protect.

Just… who was Kamukura Izuru?

~

His chest was hurting. It squeezed and tugged, it pulled and mashed. Kamukura wanted to claw at his chest, gather his heart before it was torn to shreds, into bloody chunks. He could feel it, the foreign emotion like a dull knife hacking away.

Why did he provoke them? Why did he push to see what they’d do? The words, the cold, apathetic words. He had to see, had to satisfy the darkness that swirled in his mind the moment Souda had asked him the question. Logic had crumbled at the mere echo of that voice and he had spoken.

Kamukura exhaled slowly. No. He couldn’t act like this. Provoking people… pushing boundaries… teasing… those things had been deleted meticulously. It wasn’t needed. It wasn’t necessary. Subjective lenses only clouded the perspective of events. He had to be objective, even when everything went downhill. Even when Enoshima showed him chaos and anarchy, violence and death…

Even when she died.

Kamukura clutched his hands together, swearing he could feel the metal in his palm, digging into his skin. Her voice weakening, life slipping away while he stood and did nothing played softly in his mind.

No. What was wrong with him? She was dead. She was gone. She wasn’t here in this reality. She wasn’t anything to him, merely someone who tried to get close, tried to help, and died alone and brutally. There was no sense remembering her now, thinking he had a right to remember her…
“We’re uh… here…” Souda’s stammering voice reached his ears.

Kamukura looked up, at the moderate Japanese style house. It was certainly bigger than normal houses, but not the size of Sonia’s place. They were at Saionji’s at last. Kamukura eyed Souda. No doubt… in their heated discussion he took a few wrong turns, causing them to arrive later than expected.

Logic. Facts. Kamukura eased his mind back into them, like a child seeking a safety blanket. Emotions weren’t needed… he got out of the car and walked to the house, trailing behind Komaeda and Souda. They rang the bell and not a moment passed before the door flung open, Koizumi standing at the door.

“Wow, you sure took your time.” Her arms were folded.

“Sorry we got… side tracked.” Souda rubbed his head, “But we made it!”


The symmetrical structure of the house eased Kamukura’s mind further. He focused on locating the crisp angles of the house, marveling at how precise everything was. The house itself was a grand structure of design and architecture, both modern and traditional.

“So… I take it you’re him?” Koizumi was in front, blocking his path. “I’m Koizumi Mahiru.”

“I already know…” Kamukura muttered.

Swiftly Koizumi smacked him on the head, “Geez… would it kill you to be a little polite?” Kamukura blinked and looked at her. Koizumi stood her ground, her gaze narrowed. “Well?” She prompted.

“…Kamukura Izuru.” He answered.

“Hiyoko is in the living room.” She stepped back, “I’m going to make more tea since our first pot is now cold.”

She walked off. Kamukura lifted his hand and rubbed his head. How… casual of her… a small smile twitched on his lips. He dropped his hand and followed Souda and Komaeda to the living room. Saionji was on the couch, wrapped in blankets.

“Oh, you’re just in time.” She pouted when they walked in, “I was beginning to think you ended up in a ditch.”

“You’re concern is astounding.” Komaeda laughed.

“I’m very generous.” Saionji added before she looked at him, “Kamukura, right?”

“Correct.” He sighed, but at least she wasn’t introducing herself.

“Mahiru told me this happened because Hajime got scared. Is that true?”

“Yes.” Kamukura took a seat.

“I should have known. What a wimp.” Saionji snorted, “Hey, when you see him again tell him to grow some balls.”

That… Kamukura blinked and watched as Souda doubled over laughing, even Komaeda’s mouth twitched at the corners. Saionji toothily grinned at him.
“Uh hello?” Saionji plucked a hand out from her blanket fortress, waving it, “Anyone inside? Or is this just Hajime’s husk?”

“I heard you.” Kamukura sighed. “And I suppose… I can pass the message on.”

“Finally, a fucking answer.” Saionji curled her hand back into her blankets, “So, you’re not an emotionless husk after all. Congratulations.”

Souda’s laughing got louder and Komaeda started to laugh too. Kamukura opened his mouth, what he was going to say, he never found out. Instead, a small laugh escaped his throat and his chest stopped twisting, the ache he had tried to shove away, slowly vanishing.

~

Seeing Saionji and Koizumi lightened his heart in ways Nagito was grateful for. Their conversation in the car still floated in his mind, but their visit helped lighten it, make the terrible weight in his mind vanish. The high from the laughter lingered long after they left, heading back to Hinata and Souda’s shared house.

Immediately upon returning Souda went to turn the heaters on. They weren’t as necessary during the day, but the evening brought a bit of chill that made Nagito grateful for the extra warmth. Deciding to head to the kitchen while Souda got the place warm, Nagito went to the fridge. There wasn’t a lot, but they always had some leftover rice and meat. Maybe he could make just a large plate of fried rice. Someone entered the kitchen, footsteps creaking.

“Hey, Kazuichi, what do you…” Nagito trailed off.

Kamukura was standing in place of Souda. His gaze caught the open fridge and what Nagito had in his hands. Wordlessly he walked forward and took the bowl of rice and leftover chicken, heading to the stove.

“Uh…” Nagito stood up.

“Shut the fridge, you’ll make this place colder than it already is.”

“…right…” Nagito shut the fridge harshly.

“And you have frozen peas in the freezer?” Kamukura asked.

Wasn’t this Hinata’s place? Nagito still opened the freezer, “Mixed frozen vegetables actually.”

“Take it out.” Kamukura was digging for a frying pan. “Well?”

Nagito took the vegetables and handed the cold bag over, “You’re… cooking?”

“…what do you think I’m going to do?” Kamukura sighed, “Just… get out of my way.”

Was it Nagito’s imagination, or was Kamukura flushed? It had to be from the coolness of the house. “Right… I’ll… set the table…”

Nagito busied himself. Soon the kitchen was filled with the sound of frying and warmth as both the heater and the stove helped. Souda had ambled in and sat down, staring at Kamukura as he cooked. When it was done, he grabbed the bowls Nagito had left on the counter, served it, and brought it over.

“Thank you Kamukura.” Souda took his bowl, “Smells great.”
“It’s fried rice… anyone could make it.” Kamukura sat down.

This time, Nagito could see the pink on his cheeks. He paused. Was… Kamukura blushing? He… wasn’t as stoic as he thought… it was kind of adorable… like a kid who wanted to look tough. The fragility Kamukura was protecting was because… he was afraid.

It smacked Nagito on the head. Kamukura… was afraid of letting people in. He wasn’t made for that. The details of how he came to be filled Nagito’s mind. He was created, like in a sci-fi movie, meant to be perfect, no emotions or flaws. Chewing on his rice Nagito held back a snort. Really, Kamukura firmly stated Sonia’s idea was ridiculous multiple times, but Nagito was sure it was right. Kamukura just needed to realize he could let down his barrier, that he wouldn’t get hurt. The concept was simple enough. Just… how would he execute it?

Talking backfired… perhaps he should talk about himself? No… Kamukura would dismiss it… maybe get him in a situation where he could let go of his inhibitions? Do something fun? Or watch something scary? Was Kamukura even afraid of something? Make him laugh…? Get him drunk? No, no… definitely not the last one… that was a recipe for disaster…

“Nagito… hey, Nagito?” Souda poked him.

“Uh what?” Nagito jumped.

“I asked if you’re staying the night here.” Souda repeated.

“Oh… um…” Nagito looked at Kamukura, who shrugged.

“Do what you like.”

“I… guess?” Nagito asked, “I mean… we’d have to share the bed.” Nagito told Kamukura.

“I know.” Kamukura said, “It’s big enough for two.”

“Well then… I’m staying.” Nagito firmly said.

Yeah… that was good… he could stay and maybe figure out what to do, a plan to get Kamukura to open up just a little bit…

~

Kamukura sat in bed later, covers over his legs as Komaeda fussed with the sheets, adding another blanket over. Now that the day had ended, Kamukura felt fatigue slap his body upside the head. All he wanted was to fall down and close his eyes.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” Komaeda asked as he crawled into the other side.

“You share with Hinata.” Kamukura pointed out, “This really isn’t too different.” Besides, Komaeda would add heat and that was the furthest thing from uncomfortable.

“I… suppose…” Komaeda eased into the bed, “Good night Kamukura.”

Finally. Kamukura lay down, shutting the night light on the small dresser. Closing his eyes, he focused. This day was exhausting and he’d never be so grateful to hand everything over to Hinata. No more over thinking or chest aches… just a dreamless sleep with Hinata firmly at the reigns…

~
The walls were back, the room in order, like nothing had occurred, stained and dripping in neutral, in stagnant colour. Kamukura walked over to the table. Hinata was sitting there, or rather, slouched over, head cradled in his arms. With a lurch, Kamukura sat across from him, reaching over to shake Hinata.

“Get up.” Kamukura ordered, “Let’s try this again.”

“Why?” Hinata muttered into his arms, “We messed up twice...” He peered up, “I wasn’t afraid the second time. I understood where I went wrong... so why did that happen?”

Sonia and Komaeda’s words drifted in his mind. Their stupid idea... thinking he needed... he shoved that away. It didn’t matter now.

“No idea.” Kamukura huffed. “Let’s get this over with.”

“You know... they say insanity is defined by doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

“Well then, I suppose all of humanity is insane then.” Kamukura dryly said, reaching for Hinata’s arm.

The moment his fingers touched Hinata’s arm, Kamukura felt the heat, the dry, consuming heat fill him. It was scorching, like touching the sun. It burned his fingers, through muscle and fat, down to his bones, trailing up his arm. Kamukura felt a scream well up in his throat. No... no why was this happening? It shouldn’t hurt... Hinata should seamlessly join him and...

“Kamukura?” Hinata was crowding him, “Let go, let go... you’re...”

His words were lost with the walls once again crumbling, this time, the entire room slowly catching fire, like Kamukura was the kerosene soaked rag and now he was igniting the entire room. Everything around them was bathed in an orange-red glow, spiraling around in a dome as the fire raced up the walls, caressing everything with ash filled fingers. The mirrors once again surrounded them, creating showing Kamukura, surrounded by fire, no... he was the fire. His hair whipped around like tendrils of flame, turning orange, red, and yellow. His clothes were ablaze... and his skin. Everything was a warm glow of consumption, of destruction, except his eyes, which were once again, a vivid green.

~

Nagito woke to Kamukura shifting in the sheets, curling them around his legs. His breathing was uneven and sweat was glistening off his forehead. Sleep immediately fled Nagito. He scrambled over, touching Kamukura’s head. It was hot, like he was running a fever. A whimper escaped his lips and his hands started to clench the sheets tightly. What was happening? Nagito scooped Kamukura into his arms naturally, feeling the familiar weight of Hinata’s body in his arms. Shaking him harshly, Nagito pulled Kamukura closer.

“Kamukura, wake up, wake up.” Nagito urged, “It’s just a nightmare... you’re fine... you’re fine.” He shook him harder, “Wake up!”

His voice rang in the room. Nagito continued to shake Kamukura. What kind of dream was he having in order to induce such a reaction? Kamukura’s arms flailed, his grip on the sheets ripping away, falling onto Nagito’s shirt. Nails dug into his back, but Nagito didn’t stop holding Kamukura.

“Wake up... wake up...” Nagito continued to say, stopping his shaking, slowly rocking, “Kamukura...”
The body in his arms stilled. Nagito felt his heart spike into his throat. Pulling Kamukura away gently, Nagito saw vivid images of him not breathing, or worse.

But he was still, eyes open. For a moment, Nagito saw vivid green, before it faded back to normal. His breathing was deep and harsh against Nagito’s body and his nails stopped digging into his back. Nagito gave a small smile.

“Uh… you were having a nightmare and…”

“I’m not a child.” Kamukura said, “Let go.”

His voice was shaky. Nagito shook his head and immediately tightened his embrace, “Look… it’s okay. You had a nightmare. It’s fine. You don’t need to act like you’re okay. Just… let me hold you.”

“You… It’s okay.” Kamukura squirmed.

“No, it wasn’t.” Nagito answered, hugging Kamukura, “Stop it. Relax. It’s too early to argue. Go back to sleep.”

Kamukura opened his mouth several times, before he frowned and slowly relaxed in Nagito’s arms, his shoulders dropping, his breathing slowly evening out. Nagito let out a long sigh and closed his eyes, keeping a firm grip on Kamukura before sleep took him.

Daylight woke him. Kamukura sat up and frowned. It didn’t work again. Something was wrong with him and then… Komaeda had seen… he had… Kamukura shifted, feeling Komaeda’s arms around him, felt his breathing evenly causing his chest to rise and fall.

Warmth flooded his cheeks. Komaeda had seen… he had seen him lose control and he had comforted him how… mortifying… and kind. The memory from earlier was slightly blurred with the room and mixed with the terrible heat that racked his body when he woke, but Komaeda hadn’t left… he had stayed and held him, not backing down.

Sitting up, Kamukura looked at Komaeda. He didn’t look different from the Komaeda in his memories… but he was a lot more pleasant. Kinder, more open, optimistic… no wonder Hinata liked him.

Kamukura didn’t realize he was pressing a kiss to Komaeda’s lips until he felt Komaeda sigh against his, teasing Kamukura with moisture. Immediately he pulled away, heart slowly pounding in his chest. What… was that? Kamukura pulled his gaze away. He had just kissed his… technical boyfriend… and his heart was pounding.

“Stupid.” Kamukura frowned, touching his chest, “That’s just Hinata reacting inside.”

It was a flimsy lie, but one Kamukura was going to cling to regardless.

Chapter End Notes

Kamukura: I know I usually use first name when it's in the character's POV but... I found myself using Kamukura and didn't stop.
Komaeda's clothes: I thought it hilarious for Komaeda to slowly invade Hinata's closet and then some day Hinata realizing too late.

Green Eyes: I'm aware Hinata's eyes are more... hazel... but for the contrast to Kamukura's red, I wanted in the dream to have vivid green eyes.

Sakura shaped carrot: I'm not too sure how to say it, but I feel "sakura flower" is redundant... so I just went with "sakura".

Saionji's leg: Adding to my head canon that Saionji broke one of her legs in Despair, I felt like adding how she did it. Again, this is just my head canon.

Fried Rice: Easily my favourite dish. I just wrote it how I cook it. You can add egg to your rice, but I'm not a fan of that. Also in Japan they eat fried rice with a spoon.
Endings Are Always A Little Bittersweet

Chapter Notes

OK. DONE.

Honesty moment here: I spent a long time agonizing over this fic. I'm not one to concretely plan for things, so the end was never set in stone. I had tossed many ideas around for an ending, and for Kamukura (who stayed longer than anticipated). However, I think what I wrote is good. I'm happy. Modern AU fics are fun, but exhausting. I suppose having two (Ties and Moving) at the same time was not my best idea. Things started to bleed and I would forget things I've written or said.

That being said, I'm all for slightly open endings. I admit, I wrote Nidai significantly less than originally thought, but when I tried to think up scenes, all of them felt done before. So, apologies for that.

However, without all the support: the kudos, the comments, the bookmarks, I would have never written this much. I'm so grateful to everyone who took the time to read this, to send in comments and kudos. It really got me through, helped me write. There were multiple times I would say to myself "JUST WHAT AM I DOING WITH THIS FIC?" or "THIS FIC IS FRUSTRATING ME!", but your comments really helped me see what you liked and enjoyed. So, thank you to everyone.

I hope you all enjoy this final chapter. Is this the end of the series? I don't know. I think I want a break from Modern AU in general for a while. Maybe once I'm recuperated, I'll write some shorts (and I MEAN shorts this time, I really need to stop myself).

Feel free to leave kudos and comments! They always make my day.

Also, finally, if you want, you can hit me up on tumblr. I've always debated on sharing my tumblr, but I figured, why not? Warning, it's my personal one, so I reblog and talk about whatever I want and there is no theme. However, if that interests you, please, feel free to check it out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kamukura didn’t lay down in bed, but he also didn’t leave. His legs, or rather, Hinata’s legs, felt heavy and warm. The covers sat, pooling around his hips, keeping the heat in. A small voice in the back of his mind told him to move, to get out, not laze around. But his body didn’t listen, just sat like a lump. Komaeda still lay beside him, his breathing even and soft. His presence was a soft reminder of what he had stolen.

Long after his stolen kiss, Kamukura’s lips still tingled, pulsing, as if begging for more. He frowned and curled his legs closer, bending them up so he could rest his head on his knees. Foolishly his heart pounding and Kamukura stole another look at Komaeda. The ease he could take more kisses without Komaeda knowing pulsed in the back of his mind, the idea slowly festering.

Kamukura shut it down as quickly as he could. One stolen kiss was barely an offense, but multiple? He wasn’t Komaeda’s boyfriend. He wasn’t Hinata. He shouldn’t be desiring any intimate physical
contact with Komaeda. It was cheating.

Or… at least technically. Kamukura swallowed softly. Technically he was in Hinata’s body. If they shoved the idea that it wasn’t Hinata in the driver’s seat away, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to kiss Komaeda while he was awake. Perhaps, Komaeda could pretend it was Hinata.

The bedding shifted, signalling Komaeda waking up. Kamukura looked down as Komaeda’s eyes opened slowly, a soft languid air around him, as he yawned and sat up, hair sticking everywhere.

“Good morning Kamukura.” He said through another yawn. “Sleep well?”

“Yes.” Kamukura answered, “Good morning Komaeda.”

Komaeda flopped back down, a soft whishing of air around them for a moment, “Today is Sunday.” He stated the obvious, “Want to do something together?”


“You know.” Komaeda rolled over onto his stomach, shoving his arms under a pillow so he could prompt himself up, “Like see an exhibit? Or go to a park? Or perhaps you want to wander around down town?”

Oh. “Like a date?” Kamukura clarified, “I’m not Hinata.”

Komaeda sighed, “Is that a factor in us going out somewhere?”

“It should be.” Kamukura answered.

“I disagree.” Komaeda looked up at him, “I’m aware you’re not Hajime. That’s fine, you know. Apart from the strange circumstance we’re in now, in the end, this is me wanting to hang out with you.”

… he didn’t mean that. Kamukura felt his heart twist. Komaeda couldn’t possibly mean that. He just wanted to pretend he was spending a day with Hinata. Well… he could act. Kamukura wasn’t about to protest. In a way, it also got him out of the house and would alleviate some of his boredom.

“Fine.” Kamukura agreed, “Pick something. I don’t care.”

“Great.” Komaeda beamed, “I’ve been wanting to go to this aquarium for a while. It opens at ten. Could we be ready by then?”

“Sure.” Kamukura shrugged. It didn’t matter.

Or… at least, he tried to tell himself.

~

The aquarium was busy by the time they arrived. Kamukura frowned at the crowd, but Komaeda simply grabbed his hand and tugged him along, babbling about the place, acting like a guide. The contact on his hand burned, but Kamukura chose to ignore it. Playing along with Komaeda was part of their outing.

Once they got to the front, Komaeda paid for the tickets with ease, blushing when the woman gave them a smile and slyly told them to “have fun.” Kamukura didn’t correct her assumption.

Inside, the aquarium was split up into parts, some of the areas more educational, with presentations
and information scattered on boards. Some of the other areas were just there for viewing, with huge glass tanks, all the way up to the ceiling, showing a variety of marine life. Outside were some shows and areas for seeing the animals up close. Kamukura didn’t care, and Komaeda seemed to know this. They migrated to an exhibit about jellyfish, Komaeda not saying much, just letting them sit in silence. Kamukura appreciated it; the aquarium was loud enough without Komaeda chattering in his ears. Instead, he looked at the displays, staring at the tanks, and found himself smiling.

“You know, I have often wondered how an animal like the jellyfish has survived for so long.” Komaeda softly mused.

“Jellyfish aren’t defenseless.” Kamukura pointed out. “They can be extremely deadly.”

“I know.” Komaeda nodded, “Just… when I see one, all I see is this limp bag floating in the ocean. I suppose, sometimes we need to just go with the flow and not worry.”

“Or just develop deadly defenses.” Kamukura huffed.

“Right.” Komaeda laughed softly, “Go with the flow but don’t take any crap, is that it?”

“I suppose.” Kamukura shrugged.

Komaeda tugged on his hand, “Let’s go somewhere else? I picked this place, so you can pick the next.”

Kamukura froze. What did he say? He didn’t care. This was supposed to be Komaeda’s pretend date. He had to think, what would Hinata say? He’d probably pick somewhere with an artistic vibe, for inspiration.

“This way.”

Kamukura decided, dragging Komaeda towards an area with more tanks and animals and less information. He hoped he picked right. The tanks didn’t just extend to the ceiling, but also curled in an arch, so people could walk under them too. Kamukura followed Komaeda, standing off the side, looking up, so they could see everything. Their hands were still together, Komaeda’s palm warm against Kamukura’s.

His thoughts from the morning popped in his mind and his lips tingled. It would be easy, to just pull Komaeda down and kiss him. He wouldn’t struggle, he’d probably enjoy it. It would be just another way to get Komaeda to believe he was on a date with Hinata.

Kamukura’s heart stuttered and he immediately shoved the thoughts away again.

~

“I’m sorry what?” Kamukura looked at him, eyes narrowing slightly.

Nagito sighed and pointed to the calendar hanging on the wall beside the fridge. It was a custom one, something Koizumi made and gifted at Christmas. The pictures she had taken were snapshots of the group, all candid. Nagito never discovered when she had taken the time to get as many photos as she got, but he was not about to question. For all he knew, Koizumi was a camera ninja.

Though that was beside the point. The date was Monday and Nagito knew exactly what was on Hinata’s schedule. “Class. You have to go to class.” He repeated.

“…” Kamukura stared at him, unblinking, like he couldn’t process the words Nagito was speaking.
“Kamukura…” Nagito shifted his bag, checking his phone. At this rate they’d both be late. “Come on, we have to go.”

“No, you have to go.” Kamukura said, “It isn’t as though the professors keep track of attendance, and I’m not Hinata.”

Nagito exhaled. “It doesn’t matter if you’re Hajime or not. He has projects and work to do. Work, I know for a fact, isn’t here, but at the university. Hajime wants to pass his classes, you know.”

“University is silly… half the people don’t care anyways.” Kamukura muttered.

“Well, if you don’t go you’ll be in the half that doesn’t care.” Nagito pointed out sharply. “Now, get a move on.”

Kamukura glared at him, mouth pressed in a thin line. Nagito waited, trying to not tap his foot or look at his phone again. His heart twisted and Nagito tried to smother the voice in the back of his mind, bouncing off the walls, berating him for standing still.

“Fine.” Kamukura huffed, “For today only.”

Nagito held his tongue, wanting to tell Kamukura that despite the situation they were stuck in, he could at least make Hinata’s life a bit easier and pretend to be him and go to his classes.

“Thank you.” Nagito opted for neutrality.

“But, I’m driving.” Kamukura said, and with dexterity, snatched the key from Nagito.

~

Class wasn’t too bad, since most people left him alone. Kamukura was grateful that Hinata’s Monday had mainly drawing and painting, allowing him to work in silence. Whatever Hinata wanted for the paintings and drawings, Kamukura wasn’t sure, but he found his arm moving in muscle memory, adding things without a thought. Hopefully once this was over, he hadn’t screwed Hinata’s work over.

What made the day a bit worse though, was Komaeda coming to pick him up. Some of Hinata’s classmates greeted him with ease, as though this was a regular occurrence. It made Kamukura wary that he had to do something Hinata would do, less the illusion be broken, but all Komaeda did was hold his hand and drag him out of the room. Outside, the air was warming and the sun out.

Kamukura trailed after Komaeda, their hands not breaking contact.

“How was class?” Komaeda asked.

“Not too bad.” Kamukura wished Komaeda didn’t shoot him a grin, “Only because we were working and no one talked to me.”

“If you say so.” Komaeda hummed. “Thanks for doing this. Hajime’s projects are due soon.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” Kamukura huffed.

“Right.” Komaeda laughed, “Anyways, sorry, I had to park a bit further away. I’m close to the hospital.”

Kamukura shrugged. Walking never hurt anyone. They continued to walk, brushing past people, cutting across grass, heading towards the health science building. All the way back, their hands
didn’t break contact.

“He called me!” Owari’s voice bounced off the walls.

Nagito pulled his phone away from his ear, “That’s lovely.”

“I know!” Owari’s voice rose in the middle and fell gracefully at the end with a wistful sigh, “He works at the gym I’ve been going to off and on. We’ve done a few work outs together.”

That sounded intense. Nagito didn’t want to witness that in person, “Has Nidai remembered anything?”

“No, not that I know of.” Owari hummed, “But, he did offer to put in a good word with his supervisors. They’re apparently hurting for gymnastic coaches.”

“Guess your days as a waitress are limited.” Nagito smiled, “Change is good. Gymnastic coach suits you better.”

“You think?” Owari laughed, “I agree. Not that I minded being a waitress just… this is it. I’ve got a shot at this…” She laughed again. “Say, enough about me, how’s Kamukura?”

Nagito glanced over at the table. Kamukura was sitting with Souda, cards in his hand, looking blankly at them. Souda was laughing and gesturing, his voice pitched low enough that Nagito couldn’t hear him.

“He’s fine.” Nagito answered, “Playing cards with Kazuichi.”

“I… see…” He could hear Owari chewing on her lip, “I… would it be all right if I saw him again? I wasn’t exactly friendly the first time around.”

“We were all worried about Hajime.” Nagito offered.

“Yeah… but I accused him of taking of Hajiji. I implied it was on purpose.” Owari sighed, “I was panicking. I’m sorry.”

“Why don’t you tell him that in person?” Nagito suggested kindly. “Drop by some time.”

“Thanks, Nagito.” Owari said after a moment, “I will.”

Kamukura was staring at his hand. Souda had insisted on playing poker and with nothing else to do, he had silently gone along with it. His hand for the round wasn’t the best, but he wasn’t going to let Souda know. Just because he got roped into playing didn’t mean he wouldn’t win. In the distance, he could hear Komaeda on the phone, but wasn’t able to pick out what he was saying or who he was talking to.

“Hey, your move.” Souda nudged, kicking him lightly under the table.

Kamukura drew a card. It wasn’t the best. He discarded it, “You’re trying too hard.”

“At what?” Souda asked, “Poker?”

“At being friendly to me. You are missing Hinata.” Why did he have to keep spelling it out to these
people?

Souda hummed and picked a card up, before he set it down, also discarding, “It is true I miss Hajime. It is true we focused a bit too much on Hajime when you met everyone else. But think of it like this: Hajime was suddenly replaced with you, we didn’t know what happened to him, and you weren’t being forthcoming.”

He looked up, eyes bright, “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be friendly to you.”

Ridiculous. “You have to be. I’m Hinata.”

Souda blinked before he laughed, his hand nearly falling onto the table, flashing the cards for a brief second, “You’re not Hajime.”

His words shot through Kamukura, making his shoulders lock and his body immobile. Kamukura glared and forced himself to stand up, his poker face broken. “I’m leaving.”

“Wait, wait,” Souda raised a hand, muffling his laughter with the crook of his elbow, “I’m not done. You’re not Hajime… but that doesn’t matter. You’re Kamukura. I know that. Hajime is shit at poker, face shows everything. Not that I’m better either. You’ve won most of our rounds, but…”

Souda threw his hand on the table. Kamukura stared. Souda had won the round, “This time, I take the victory.” Souda grinned.

~

Later that night, Kamukura lay in bed, his mind restless. Souda had acknowledged him… said he knew he wasn’t Hinata, Saionji and Koizumi didn’t seem to show any issue with him either. And Komaeda…

Komaeda had shown concern over Hinata, but that was understandable. Souda… had some good points. It was natural for Komaeda to worry. Yet, at the same time, Komaeda wasn’t shying away from him, actually arguing, and insisting on taking him out places. If Kamukura didn’t know better… were he and Komaeda becoming… friendly?

His heart palpitated and Kamukura rolled over, so he wasn’t facing Komaeda. How foolish. Komaeda, while being nice, still wanted Hinata in the end.

~

Nagito waited until Kamukura had relaxed, his movement stopping, breathing even, before he sat up. It was still a bit jarring to see Hinata lying there, at least physically, but somehow the strangeness was slowly starting to wear away. Kamukura, even though he was in Hinata’s body, moved differently. He walked quieter, was silent, and face expressionless, calculating. Then there were the small things. He would set his chopsticks down, instead of on the edge of the bowl, he didn’t take socks off when they were inside, and he also let Nagito pull him around more.

Their… sort of date at the aquarium was nice. Not that Kamukura would ever admit it, but Nagito had noticed a calmer air around him, as though the worries about Hinata, their weird situation, and the dreams had vanished. It was enough to make Nagito’s heart pound a little bit. Sure, probably some part of his brain was reacting because it was Hinata’s body and Nagito was honest enough to admit he was head over heels with Hinata, but another part of him wanted to know Kamukura a bit better. The desire was in direct conflict with whatever Kamukura probably thought, but Nagito was nothing if not patient.
Swallowing softly, Nagito lay down, curling just a bit closer to Kamukura, until his back was pressing against Nagito’s front. The warmth lazily radiated towards Nagito, luring him into sleep.

Kamukura woke to Komaeda draped over his back, face planted in his shoulder, drooling slightly. The corner of his shirt was a bit damp. Normally it should have disgusted Kamukura, but his heart stopped. Komaeda’s breathing tickled his shoulder and juncture to his neck. His arms were sprawled on the bedding and if Kamukura moved just a little closer, they’d almost be around him. Frowning, Kamukura sat up and got out of the bed, heading to the bathroom. Hinata stared back at him, making Kamukura’s insides twist. He hadn’t dreamed about Hinata. Was that a negative sign?

“No… in the end, Hinata will come back.” Kamukura assured himself, almost touching the mirror.

Washing up, he walked out to the kitchen. Souda was there, a pile of notes and textbooks open on the table. Silently, Kamukura sat down, curling his legs to his chest. Souda looked up.

“Good morning Kamukura.” He grabbed a pile of notes, shuffling them in order, “Sleep well?”

“It was fine.” Kamukura answered.

“Hajime doesn’t have class until the afternoon today.” Souda kept talking, “It’s printmaking.”

Good to know. Kamukura sighed. No doubt Komaeda would make him go to school for Hinata again.

“Here.” Souda handed his notes over. “Quiz me.”

“What?” Kamukura accepted the notes, “I can barely read these.”

“You’ll make do.” Souda laughed, “I got some focus questions on the top. Hit me.”

There was no way he’d worm out of this. Still… that wasn’t too bad. Kamukura stared at the top for a moment before he slowly read out the question.

“I got the job!!!” – Owari

Nagito stared at his phone, the message blurring a bit due to sleep, before it registered in his brain. Grinning wildly, he sent a congratulatory message before getting out of bed. Kamukura wasn’t there, but judging from the voices waffling out of the kitchen, he was with Souda. Getting ready for the day, Nagito paused when his phone lit up again.

“Teruteru says we can have a celebration meal at his restaurant tonight. If you are free.” – Owari

He didn’t have any evening classes and would end around two. Nagito sent a confirmation text before he pocketed his phone, heading to the kitchen.

Souda was describing something, his hands moving, as though he had to pantomime along with his explanation. Kamukura sat, knees drawn to his chest, sheets of paper balanced on his legs. The moment he walked into the kitchen, Souda gave a wave and finished his talking.

“Well?” Souda looked at Kamukura.

“That was right… I suppose.”
“What?” Souda lunged, “Give me those.” He rummaged through his papers, “Here… see? I got it right.”

Nagito held a laugh, “Studying?”

“Yes!” Souda nodded, “Got finals soon.”

“Think you can take a break tonight and come over to Hanamura’s restaurant?” Nagito asked, “Owari got a new job at the gym and wants to celebrate.”

Souda hummed loudly, “I think I can make it. I only got late morning classes, so I’ll meet you there?”

“Sure.” Nagito agreed, “What about you Kamukura?”

He blinked, “Don’t I automatically have to come?”

What? Nagito raised an eyebrow, “No? You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“So, if I said no, you’d leave me be? Not pressure me or force me?”

Where was this coming from? Was this some sort of test? Nagito huffed, “We wouldn’t do that to you. Your decision is your own.”

“… I’ll come.” Kamukura concluded.

Nagito snorted. So, he wanted to come along regardless? “Great. I’ll tell Hanamura and Owari.”

Kamukura could see why Hanamura’s restaurant was popular. The décor, the menu, all of it screamed casual family restaurant, perfect for everyone. During business hours no doubt it was packed with people. Now, it was just them. Everyone was there… including Owari and… Kamukura paused. That was Nidai. What… was she thinking? If he could remember correctly, Nidai had met Hinata twice… there was no way they could tell him about Hinata’s little situation.

“You’re glaring daggers.” Komaeda leaned closer, lips almost pressing against his ear, “I’m sorry I didn’t know she was bringing Nidai too.”

“I’m leaving.” Kamukura muttered.

Komaeda shot out and grabbed his arm, “Please don’t. It makes this awkward. Just… I’ll do all the talking, I swear.”

“What was that about letting me do what I wanted?” Kamukura staunchly asked.

“I…” Komaeda groaned, “I meant it just… please everyone is sort of noticing.”

“I don’t care.” Kamukura directed his glare to Komaeda, “You gave me permission to do what I…”

His stomach growled. Komaeda’s eyes widened and he looked down. Kamukura felt his cheeks burn.

“You’ll be hungry.” Komaeda immediately said, “And we are a bit far from the house…”

“… fine.” Kamukura ripped his arm out of Komaeda’s grip, “I’ll stay.”
Komaeda straightened his back and dropped his arm, walking ahead, a smile immediately on his face when Nidai caught his gaze. It seemed Komaeda was just as good as an actor as Kamukura remembered.

“Hello Nidai. I didn’t expect you here.”

“Hello Komaeda!” Nidai boomed, “Owari insisted.”

“As a thank you.” Owari piped up, “For helping me get the job.”

“You won’t regret this.” Souda grinned, “Hanamura is a great cook.”

“I’ve been hearing.” Nidai said before he looked over. Kamukura froze, “Hello Hinata.”

Sure, Komaeda said he’d do the talking, but it wouldn’t be logical for him to cut in when the greeting was directed. Kamukura took in a deep breath, tried to draw out Hinata’s personality.

“Hello Nidai.” Kamukura said as brightly as he could, “It’s nice to see you again.”

Majority of the room gaped at him (though Tsumiki wasn’t looking him in the eyes), though Saionji rolled her eyes and Koizumi didn’t look up form her camera. Komaeda also didn’t gape, but that was because he was flashing the widest smile. It reminded Kamukura of the smiles parents gave their kids when they did something correct. He wanted to tell Komaeda to drop it, but that would be too obvious.

“Nice to see you too Hinata.” Nidai repeated back, “How’s school? Owari told me you’re an artist?”

“It’s going well.” Kamukura slowly said, edging closer to Komaeda’s side, sitting down beside him as it was expected, “I’m an Art major.”

“A small smile threatened to stretch across Kamukura’s face. How nice to hear. “Thank you.” He felt a genuine tone in his voice. “But enough about me, you seem to do a lot of interesting things. What do you exactly do?”

“Oh, me?” Nidai smiled, “Well…”

He launched into an explanation. Kamukura let the words wash over him, carefully storing bits less something was asked later. Komaeda’s hand brushed across his arm, silent, but speaking volumes. Kamukura resisted the urge to roll his eyes. As though he’d sabotage his own cover. The food slowly trickled out, dish after dish. Kamukura bit into his food and had to admit, experiencing Hanamura’s cooking for himself was a million times better than through Hinata. When dessert started to roll around, Kamukura excused himself to the washroom, but simply walked far enough so he was out of their sight.

“Running away?”

He turned, seeing Pekoyama exit the washroom, drying her hands on a small handkerchief.

“No… just wanted some quiet. I don’t know how good it was to let Tanaka meet Nidai.”

“They’re getting along well.” Pekoyama mused, “It’s very cathartic for Tanaka, being nice to Nidai.”

Kamukura hummed, waiting for Pekoyama to leave, but instead she planted herself beside him, “I’d like to apologize. When we last met I was worried for Hajime, unclear about his condition.”
Souda had said the same thing. Kamukura felt a small jab in his heart, but he ignored it. “I’ll get Hinata back soon.”

“I wasn’t implying you needed to leave.” Pekoyama calmly said, “I’ve found over the years isolating allies only creates more stress.” She gave firm look, “We don’t wish to have conflict.”

The “we” was spoken casually, giving all the implication to who she was speaking for loud and clear. Kamukura didn’t point it out.

“Hey… K- Hajime, Peko!” Owari was waving, “Teruteru has dessert!”

“I suppose we need to make an appearance.” Pekoyama mused, walking back to the table.

Kamukura sighed. No use hiding any more. He wandered back to the table, sitting in his spot. Immediately, Komaeda’s arm came up around the chair, curling around the back. Kamukura froze, not wanting to look back, but feeling the warmth radiate. What was Komaeda thinking? He immediately smothered that idea. Of course, he was doing it because Nidai was there. No doubt the man knew Komaeda and Hinata were dating. Appearances. Kamukura eased at the logic and slightly leaned into the touch. The moment he did though, he felt Komaeda’s arm stiffen, his gaze jerking behind. Everyone saw the sharpness of his movement, even Nidai.

How embarrassing. Kamukura shot Komaeda a look, trying to not nudge his head towards the table. Komaeda got the message anyways and with a small, almost sheepish grin, he turned his gaze back to the table. His arm didn’t leave.

The shrill ring of the phone woke Kamukura up. He rolled over, hand darting out of the covers, and after smacking the night table a few times, he grabbed the phone, answering.

“Hi.”

“Hi yourself.” Saionji said dully.

Kamukura blinked, “You had a bad dream.” Why else would she call so early?

“Way to cut to the chase.” Saionji huffed, her voice shaking, “Yes, I did.”

“No need for pretense.” Kamukura told her.

A beat of silence passed before Saionji spoke, her voice still shaky, but also low and angry, “You were there.”

He could see it again, the stage, the lighting, the back drops. He could hear the music and the flash of Koizumi’s camera as Saionji waved to a mainly empty theatre, her eyes swirling with madness and anticipation. He could hear the swing of the sludge hammer, the cracking of bone, the scream of agony mixed with ecstasy. He could feel the leather of the seat, the softness of the cushions under his body as he sat in the back row.

“Yes.” He whispered, solidifying the image in his mind.

“I’ve had enough of this.” Saionji said, voice equally quiet. “I’m sick of waking up so damn early.” Her voice got louder, “I’m going to do it. I’m going to try what Mioda did.”

~
He wasn’t sure why they needed to be present, but one look from Saionji when Koizumi greeted them at the door was enough for Kamukura to hold his tongue. Inside Pekoyama and Owari sat, Owari on the table, while Pekoyama was sitting properly in a chair. Tsumiki was also there, standing by the counter, a first aid kit beside her arm.

“Thanks for coming.” Koizumi softly said. “Hiyoko won’t say it but…”

“No need.” Kamukura almost gently cut her off, “We’ll make sure she doesn’t do anything.”

Koizumi’s mouth twisted into a small smile, “Right. Thanks.” She smacked him on the back, “You and Nagito are staying down here.” She announced.

As if Saionji would ever let them into their bedroom. Kamukura rolled his eyes, but Komaeda nodded for them, hand latching onto his shoulder.

“Right. We’ll stay in your kitchen.” He said before dragging Kamukura away.

Kamukura followed. There was nothing else he could do that would make Saionji feel comfortable. Really, the safety measures were about all they could do. Kamukura sat at the table, tapping his fingers over the surface. Not knowing made everything challenging.

Koizumi came in, ushering Pekoyama, Owari, and Tsumiki with her. Kamukura didn’t look away, until they were out of sight. Komaeda on the other hand, eyed the empty space, his brow furrowed.

“There is nothing else we can do.” Kamukura told him. “Besides wait down here and stop Saionji should she escape and attempt something drastic.”

“I know…” Komaeda huffed out, voice mixed, “I just… want this to go well.”

“Worse thing to happen is she fails and we try again later.” Kamukura muttered, “Isn’t that how it goes?”

Komaeda shot a look, but a small smile filled his face, “I suppose you’re right. We’ll just believe in Saionji and hope it goes well.”

“That was dangerously close to becoming a hope speech.” Kamukura muttered.

“Be quiet.” Komaeda rolled his eyes.

Silence. Kamukura tapped the table lightly, soundlessly. Perhaps it would take a while for Saionji to fall asleep? There was also the uncertainty if she’d succeed. He drifted off a little, the hum of the kitchen appliances numbing.

A loud sound echoed through the house, jolting him. Kamukura blinked and looked up. No one was running down and there wasn’t any shouting, but that didn’t mean anything. Komaeda had bolted out of his seat and was staring at the side of the staircase. A full beat passed before another sound echoed in the house, like someone had rammed themselves into a wall.

“I’m going upstairs.” Komaeda announced.

Kamukura reached out and grabbed his arm, “We need to stay down here. If she escapes the room we need to be down here.”

Komaeda stiffened in his grasp before going limp, “I know… but…” He moved a bit, tugging on Kamukura’s grip.
"The girls are upstairs." Kamukura reminded him, "Saionji isn’t alone."

"I know, I know." Komaeda said, "Still…"

A shout, probably Owari rang. Komaeda immediately tried to run, but Kamukura firmly planted his feet. "Wait a moment…"

His words were lost by the sound of running, a body smacking against a wall. It sounded near by. Kamukura let go of Komaeda, who ran to the front, to the foot of the stairs. Immediately his face paled. Kamukura jogged over.

There, at the top of the stairs, was Saionji, her hair messy, her kimono akimbo. A smile, too wide, too eerie sat on her face, slowly cracking up the sides. She wobbled towards the landing, giggling loudly. Owari suddenly burst out, almost tackling her, grabbing her arm.

"Hiyoko, no!"

"Let go of me!" Saionji practically shouted, "You wouldn’t understand. You like destroying yourself from the inside. Fucking coward. True despair will forever be out of your stained reach."

Owari paled, but her grip didn’t relax, "Hiyoko, just wait. You don’t need to do this."

"Liar!" Saionji’s voice suddenly went high, mimicking a child’s. She tugged, trying to get her arm out of Owari’s grasp.

Koizumi, Tsumiki, and Pekoyama were out a second later. Saionji snarled and kicked Owari in the knee. She gasped and her grip loosened. Kamukura heard Komaeda gasp out, running half way up the stairs.

"Get out of my way Hope Boy." Saionji snarled.

Kamukura huffed and walked up the stairs, pushing past Komaeda. This was ridiculous. "Saionji. Stop.” He glared.

Saionji blinked and relaxed, for the first time. Her gaze scanned over him before she crossed her arms, "Who the hell are you?

"Remember the theatre?” Kamukura pushed on, voice dull, “Remember the setting? The atmosphere? The dramatics? Is this what you want?"

"Kamukura…" Komaeda sharply hissed beside him, “I don’t think…”

"This setting is boring." Kamukura told her, “Your plan is boring. Even if you manage to do something, it won’t be permanent. So, stop it. Give up."

Her gaze widened, her knees trembling, “K…Kamukura? You…” She weakly glared, “But… my legs… Despair.”

"Is pointless as your attempt.” Kamukura blankly told her, “Stop this."

Saionji collapsed on the floor, her eyes fluttering, body swaying. Koizumi was immediately at her side, holding her, as Saionji slowly slackened in her arms. Pekoyama was beside her, alert. Tsumiki was clutching the first aid kit to her chest. Komaeda was already up the stairs, kneeling on them. Kamukura waited at the bottom, watching as Saionji slowly opened her eyes.

"Hiyoko?" Koizumi asked.
“Mahiru?” Saionji asked before she bolted up, “Mahiru!” She blinked, “It… worked… it worked!” She grinned and bolted up, “Yay! I did it!” She danced a little before stopping, “Wait… why am I in the hallway?”

“You tried to escape.” Pekoyama firmly said, “You did a number on the room.”

“Oh…” Saionji weakly said before she wobbled to the floor, “I… think I need a moment.”

“Take all the time you need.” Koizumi said, pulling her into her arms, “Just let Tsumiki check you over.”

“Okay.” Saionji didn’t protest.

~

They were banished to the kitchen on the errand of making tea. Kamukura watched as Komaeda rummaged through the cabinets and drawers as the water boiled.

When Tsumiki and Pekoyama came down, the water was done and the tea steeping. Kamukura watched as Pekoyama helped Komaeda, grabbing the cups.

“K-Kamukura?”

He looked over. Tsumiki was standing by him. “Yes?”

“I… just w-wanted to say… thank you. For h-helping Saionji.”

“No problem.” Kamukura answered.

“A-And.” Tsumiki swallowed, “I-I’d like t-to say… I-I know Hinata w-will be okay. S-so… don’t w-worry about it.”

Her face was pink. Kamukura stared. Was this her… apologizing? For when they first met? He nodded, feeling a small smile on his lips.

“It’s fine.”

~

Apparently, Saionji’s success meant they had to go out. The sky was already darkened, but the street lit with people. Kamukura watched as everyone bustled around, cars passing, the sound of night life slowly started filling the air. Kamukura huddled a thin spring jacket over his shoulders and followed Komaeda, as he talked about a great Thai place just a bit down the block.

“There it is!” Komaeda pointed across the street, stopping at the light. “It’s really good. We’ve never been there.”

We’ve… he meant Hinata. Kamukura frowned. Was this… another date? Hadn’t he already indulged Komaeda with an outing to the aquarium? That was enough… bonding time, or whatever crap Komaeda believed about him “experiencing something genuinely”. Really, Sonia’s idea was foolish, clearly showing the ideal for a happy ending. Yet, of course, Komaeda took the idea and ran with it. Unbelievable. He hadn’t had a dream since the aquarium and that felt like proof enough that Komaeda’s little idea wasn’t going to work. All he was doing was taking Komaeda to places he’d take Hinata, only saying it was different because he was Kamukura.

“You mean you and Hinata.” Kamukura corrected.
Komaeda pursed his lips, “No, I meant you too.”

Kamukura huffed, “This really isn’t necessary. You don’t need to take me to a date spot you’d take Hinata to.”

“What’s your problem?” Komaeda sighed, turning to him, “You were talking to Tsumiki earlier, not hostile, what changed?”

Changed? “Nothing,” Kamukura told him, “Just you’re really desperate if you think this is going to be any different than the aquarium.”

“The… what now?” Komaeda had stepped to the side. The light was green, but they weren’t moving. “I’m confused. This is dinner… at a restaurant… it literally has nothing to do with the aquarium.”

How dense could he be? “I mean this bonding. All you’re doing is pretending I’m Hinata. You’re just taking me places you’d take Hinata and calling it a genuine experience.”

Komaeda’s mouth opened and shut for a while, before he slumped, his eyes downcast. Kamukura felt a stab in his heart. This… was not what he expected.

“You think that’s what I’m doing?” Komaeda asked, “Pretending you’re Hajime? I’m not.” He looked up, his gaze focused. “You think I’m just dragging you along to places I’d go with Hajime and substituting you in?”

He stepped forward, grabbing Kamukura’s arm. A few people were staring, but they quickly walked by. Kamukura could care less. All he could do was focus on Komaeda, who’s eyes were firm, but his body sagging, showing his exhaustion.

“Hajime doesn’t like spicy food.” Komaeda said, his voice soft, almost mellow, “This restaurant is known for being really spicy. He hates it. I like spicy food. We’ve never gone here because I know he won’t enjoy it.”

Kamukura’s mouth was not dry and he was not stunned, but he couldn’t get the words out.

“I picked this restaurant, because I want to try it with you. If by some chance you’re the same as Hajime, there are other options around here. I’d pay for my food and we could pick another restaurant.”

“Oh…” Kamukura felt the sound escape his lips before he could stop it.


And with that he leaned closer, “So, will you stop acting like we don’t care about you and instead try to enjoy this night? With me?”

God… his voice was low… and he was so close. Kamukura’s lips tingled and his brain rudely reminded him of the kiss he had stolen. He licked his lips and nodded, not trusting his voice. Komaeda stepped back.

“Good. Now… please… let’s eat dinner?”

They walked to the restaurant in silence, the break in silence happening when the waitress chatted
with them, leading them to a table. Kamukura gingerly sat down and glanced at the menu. After picking something, he ordered. Silence fell over them. A small voice, perhaps Hinata’s influence, told him to apologize, but he couldn’t. Instead, Kamukura stared at the table, waiting for their order to arrive. When it did, Kamukura stared. It smelt spicy… Komaeda was staring at him, waiting. With a sigh, Kamukura took a bite. The spiciness burned his mouth, but it was pleasant, leaving his mouth a bit numb with a sharp after taste. He took another bite, this time a bigger one.

“I’m glad you like it.” Komaeda gently said.

Kamukura wanted to glare at him, but he opted for eating. Komaeda laughed.

~

They walked back to the car, Komaeda humming, “So, you enjoyed that.”

“I guess so.” Kamukura muttered.

“I’m glad.” Komaeda twirled his car keys, “We’re here.”

Sure enough, there was the car. Komaeda unlocked it and they got inside. Kamukura slouched in the seat as Komaeda started the car’s engine, and smoothly drove. Hinata’s place with Souda wasn’t too far, and before Kamukura knew it, they were back.

“This was fun.” Komaeda said, parking the car.

“It was a good restaurant.” Kamukura answered.

“I’m just grateful you liked the food. I was craving something spicy.” Komaeda looked over, “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me for my food preferences.” Kamukura responded.

Komaeda’s gaze lingered. Kamukura shuffled. What was it? Did he have something to say? Or… was he expecting him to say something? Kamukura huffed, but figured… somewhat of an apology was expected. Opening his mouth, he started to speak, but was cut off.

Their lips were pressed together, Komaeda kissing him. Kamukura froze. It was nothing like the stolen one. This one was moving, warm, Komaeda pressing lightly, before backing away, cheeks pink.

“Sorry.” He gasped out, “Just… I wanted to…”

There were so many implications. Was he missing Hinata? Did he just want someone to kiss? Kamukura didn’t care. He threw it all away and with a tug of his hand, he pulled Komaeda into a heated kiss, their mouths opening, tongues curling and sucking as they sloppily made out in Komaeda’s car. Their hands pulled at each other and Kamukura felt himself being pinned to the seat. When they broke away, Komaeda’s gaze was dark and Kamukura could feel his chest rising.

“I…” Komaeda pressed his hand to his lips, “Was that okay?”

“You’re a good kisser.” Kamukura threw out.

Komaeda snorted, “No I meant… was that okay… me kissing you?”

Kamukura shrugged, “This is Hinata’s…”
Komaeda groaned, “Didn’t you learn anything from our pre-dinner argument? I know you’re not Hajime. I went to dinner with you, not Hajime. I just kissed you, not Hajime. I wanted to kiss you. I’m asking if it’s okay that I kissed you, Kamukura.”

The fluttering in his chest returned. Kamukura opened his mouth, to say what, he didn’t know. He had no plan, all he knew was, the words he spoke, came from his twisting, aching heart.

“It’s okay.” He whispered, “It’s… more than okay. Though… you’re explaining to Hinata when he returns.”

Komaeda laughed, his shoulder shaking, “I suppose I will. I’m sure he’ll listen. But for now, good night?”

“Good night… Komaeda.” Kamukura conceded before he got out of the car. His lips still tingled.

Ambling back into the house, Kamukura silently went to his room, though he did wave to Souda, who was out in the kitchen, still studying. Flopping onto his bed, Kamukura curled up, turning on his side.

He had kissed Komaeda. Or, more accurately, Komaeda had kissed him and then he returned it. A warmth, fluttering and sweet overwhelmed him, making Kamukura’s head spin. Their… date, he really had no better word for it, played over and over in his mind. Komaeda had done something with him. Not pretending he was Hinata.

It only made Kamukura’s heart flutter harder.

~

“Another test?” – Mahiru

“Yes. It worked with Saionji, so we think someone else should try.” – Peko

“Fuyuhiko has said he can volunteer.” – Peko

“Volunteer? What’s this? Class participation?” – Hiyoko

“If you wish to put it that way, yes.” – Peko

“And if no one else is willing…” – Peko

“It sounds great. We shall try with Kuzuryuu next then!” – Sonia

~

Kuzuryuu gave one long look at them before crossing his arms, “I feel like I’m on lock down.”

“Oh, but you are!” Mioda cheerfully said, Sonia nodding in the background, “You’re Baby Gangsta! Who knows what mishap may happen.”

“Baby…” Kuzuryuu’s eye twitched, “And mishap? Saionji tried to throw herself down the stairs.”

“Yeah, but Hiyoko doesn’t have access to as many dangerous weapons as you.” Owari brightly pointed out, “Hence, why Peko did a sweep of the room. Three times if you want to be accurate.”

“W-we d-don’t want y-you hurting yourself.” Tsumiki added. “S-so we’re being s-safe.”
“She’s right Fuyuhiko.” Owari slapped his back, “So go, sleep. Peko will be watching you like a hawk and we’ll all be around. No worries, right?”

Kuzuryuu coughed and straightened his shirt, but nodded, “Very well.”

He went into the room, Pekoyama following him, the door sliding shut firmly. Nagito sat down at the entrance to the door, comforted by a plush pillow and some tea. Beside him, Sonia was also sitting, pouring tea.

“Thanks Sonia.” Nagito accepted the cup.

“You’re welcome. Let’s hope this turns out well.”

“As long as this isn’t a fiasco like Saionji’s.”

Sonia weakly smiled, “Yes, no complications would be for the best.”

He drank the tea, green, of course. Kuzuryuu had some of the best green tea collections Nagito had ever seen. He was even more privileged to drink it. Really, the amount of Japanese culture contained in the Kuzuryuu complex was breathtaking. Nagito sipped his tea again, allowing the warmth to calm him down, for him to not focus on the door. Pekoyama was inside, meaning things had a higher chance of succeeding. Mioda and Mitarai were a bit further down the hallway, closer to the entrance, and Tsumiki was on speed dial, not able to physically make it, but there for medical support.

In a way, Nagito was thankful Kamukura wasn’t present. Their last… interaction… was drowning in heaviness, of warmth. Nagito didn’t regret it, kissing Kamukura. It had felt right, as right as it felt kissing Hinata. Even though technically it was Hinata’s body, an entirely different person was inhabiting. Nagito sighed. In the end, technicalities didn’t matter, all that mattered in the end was their kiss, and Kamukura not running away.

“Say, Nagito.” Sonia softly said.

“Yes?” Nagito looked over.

“How’s Kamukura doing?” She asked.

Funny she should bring him up. “He’s fine. Acts less abrasive. I think your idea is working.”

“It is?” Sonia brightened, “I just felt regardless of if it’s Kamukura or Hajime, everyone wants kindness in their lives.”

“You should tell that to Kamukura.” Nagito laughed, “Been going around in circles for a while.”

Sonia bit her lip, “I suppose the reactions our group had weren’t favourable.”

Not favourable was light, but Nagito held that opinion, “He’s warming up to everyone and everyone else is warming up to him. I think that’s what counts.”

“I agree.” Sonia nodded before she held the teapot, “More tea?”

“Yes please.”

She was in the middle of pouring when a crash echoed out the room. Nagito froze, nearly dropping the tea cup, but managed to set it down without breaking it. Saionji’s… incident… burned hotly in the back of his mind, slowly worming its way to the forefront until it consumed him. Kuzuryuu wasn’t… what would he do? Nagito’s mind drew a blank, but he knew it would be dangerous…
possibly for more than just Kuzuryuu.

He stood up, hand hovering at the door. Sonia was beside him, her brow furrowed. They both leaned closer to the door, as if they’d hear what was happening inside. A beat passed in silence, and Nagito’s hand was hovering, but Sonia gave a firm nod. Nagito touched the door and was about to open it, when it opened from the inside.

Pekoyama stood there, not a hair out of place, eyes focused, posture relaxed. Sonia immediately sprang to action, something Nagito was grateful for.

“What happened?”

“Fuyuhiko is fine.” Pekoyama told them, “Woke up, took one look at me, at the room, broke a priceless vase, snarled a little, and then fell asleep.”

… that was it? Nagito peeked into the room, as best he could with Pekoyama blocking the way, and spotted half of Kuzuryuu. His face was relaxed, eyes shut, chest rising evenly with sleep.

“I’ll keep an eye out in case he wakes up hostile again, but I am presuming… everything will be all right.” Pekoyama told them.

“Okay, thank you Peko.” Sonia said.

The door shut softly, and as if he were controlled with the movement of the door, Nagito fell to the ground. Sonia sat beside him smoothly. The tea was a bit cool, but Nagito still drank it. Sonia immediately poured him more before pouring herself more. Nagito drank his cup, letting the warmth linger all the way down.

~

“Well, how did it go?” Souda asked the moment Komaeda stepped into the house.

Kamukura watched as Komaeda gave a weak smile, “It went surprisingly well. No mutilation or violence.”

“Surprising.” Souda mused, before chuckling, “Not that we wanted violence.”

“Yeah… I’m just glad… nothing really happened, besides a broken vase.” Komaeda flopped onto the couch, “Mind if I have something to drink?”

“Sure, Kamukura can get that for you.”

“What.”

“Come on… be a pal.” Souda waved his papers, “Studying over here.”

“You’ve been studying for hours. Studies show breaks are optimal for studying.”

“Yeah… I’ve had multiple breaks.” Souda picked his phone up, “Was busy destroying maps over here like fifteen minutes ago.”

… so that was what he was doing on his phone. Kamukura huffed, but went to the cabinets, grabbing a glass, and filled it with water. Heading over to Komaeda, he roughly handed it to him.

“Here.”
“How sweet of you.” Komaeda accepted it, “Thanks Kamukura. Sit with me?”

It was better than sitting in silence with Souda studying. Or being asked to help him again. There was only so much he could help with before his mind numbed from the writing. Plopping down on the couch with Komaeda, Kamukura curled close, feeling Komaeda’s warmth.

Their last encounter had ended with kisses, of heated words that resonated inside of him. Kamukura wasn’t foolish enough to hold onto them like a lovesick moron, but he wasn’t foolish enough to toss them away. Komaeda had spoken from the heart, meaning…

“Sit closer.” Komaeda sighed, and setting his glass down, he pulled them together, their sides flush.

“See? Not so bad.”

“I never said it was.” Kamukura muttered.

Komaeda hummed, “Mind if I stay the night?”

The last time he had asked it, Kamukura had flippantly replied with how he would do it with Hinata anyways, but now… the intimacy of the question hit him hard. Komaeda was directly asking him. The answer was hanging on his tongue, but his jaw didn’t want to work. Immediately Komaeda wilted beside him.

“I mean… if you aren’t comfortable with that…”

Kamukura lunged, not trusting himself to do something right, and pressed a kiss to Komaeda’s cheek. Pulling away he watched as Komaeda smiled widely. Leaning forward he pressed a kiss to Kamukura’s cheek, warm and solid.

“When you answer me like that, I suppose I can’t say no.”

How… dorky. Kamukura poked his side, rolled his eyes, and pretending he wasn’t smiling.

~

They fell into bed, hot, sweaty, and unable to dislodge themselves from each other. Kamukura felt a blush hotly seep in his cheeks as Komaeda kissed him passionately, trailing his lips everywhere. Breaking for air, they panted, puffs of air ghosting across their partially bare bodies.

“We… don’t have to do anything you’re uncomfortable with.” Komaeda told him.

“Shut up.” Kamukura reached out and trailed his hands down, “I’m not some blushing, stuttering individual. I know what I want.”

His hands traced the hollows of Komaeda’s hips and gleefully Kamukura watched his eyes flash, before they were pressed flush against each other, kissing again.

~

_The room. The neutrality._

_It had been oppressing, a weight on his mind, soul, and being. The table still sat, tall and looming. Hinata was still there, head on the table, cradled in his arms. Kamukura’s lips tingled, no his entire body tingled, as if the actions he did with Komaeda had transferred with him into dreams. He shook his head. It didn’t matter._

_Firmly, Kamukura walked up to Hinata and grabbed him, pulling him up. Hinata blinked, staring at_
him, before he spoke.

“We’re trying again?”

Did he have to sound tired? Kamukura frowned. “No, we’re not.”

“We… aren’t?” Hinata’s eyes widened. “But why? Are you still uncertain?”

“That isn’t it.” Kamukura slowly said, “I don’t mean we aren’t joining, I just mean… I think it’s different from what I thought it was earlier.”

He pressed their palms together before Hinata could speak. There was no scorching heat, no burning that threatened to consume them, eat them alive. A warm light glowed between their hands, spreading slowly and steadily out. The room didn’t crumble. Colour started to seep into the walls, spreading out into the floors, the table. Details to the room were being added, pictures on the walls, an intact mirror. Couches and cushions, book shelves, coffee tables… the room was coming to life.

Kamukura smiled and leaned closer to Hinata, pressing their foreheads together. Now, in the colour and vibrancy of the room, he could feel Hinata’s warmth.

“By the way…”

“You kissed Nagito.” Hinata cut him off with a laugh, “I could… uh… feel it.”

Oh. Kamukura blinked, feeling all his words disappear. He had done more than just kiss Komaeda, and he knew that Hinata knew, but there was no way he was going to say that aloud.

“I don’t mind.” Hinata said, “Nagito is hard to resist.”

Kamukura snorted, “He is good… I suppose.”

Hinata flicked him on the forehead, “Don’t lie.” He smugly smiled, “I could feel…”

Kamukura pushed him away before he could finish.

~

Hajime woke up, head pounding, but his heart steadily beating in his chest. His bed was solid under him and after being deprived of that feeling for so long, Hajime sunk into it, ignoring how tender his body felt. Komaeda really left a number of bruises along his arms and sides. Hajime snorted. It didn’t matter.

Komaeda stirred beside him. Hajime felt his heart leap. How long had it been since he had held him in his arms? Snuggling over, Hajime pulled Komaeda into a hug, nuzzling his shoulder. The warmth was lovely.

“… Kamukura?” Komaeda muttered.

“Nope.” Hajime answered.

A beat passed before Komaeda stiffened and sat up, pulling away from Hajime’s arms, eyes wide.

“Then…”

Hajime pouted, “I liked having you in my arms… come back. It’s been forever.”

“You’re… Hajime…”
“Yes.” Hajime answered, “Now, come back and let me snuggle you.”

Komaeda lowered himself down slowly. The moment he could do it, Hajime pulled him into a tight hug, snuggling his face into Komaeda’s bare chest. Komaeda on the other hand slowly raised his free arm, touching Hajime’s head.

“So… you’re back… what happened to Kamukura?”

Good question. Hajime tried to think, “He’s in that room… the one that was so neutral and boring earlier… now it’s Colourful. Maybe he’s in there? I could try checking?”

Hajime closed his eyes, but after that was lost. What did he do now? Perhaps… if he just thought of Kamukura…

~

_He was in the room again. Hajime blinked. It was still colourful, the furniture and things still there. Sitting at the table, with a book, was Kamukura, who stared at him, eyebrow cocked._

“I didn’t realize you disliked being in control that much.”

Wait… in control? Did that mean? Hajime crossed the room. “Could we do a test?”

Before Kamukura could answer, Hajime touched his hand. The same warm glow filled the space and suddenly Kamukura vanished. Hajime picked the book he was reading up, making sure to bookmark it. _He had barely set the book down when Kamukura reappeared, arms folded._

“Komaeda is confused. Go back.”

“So, we can… switch now?” Hajime asked, eyes wide, “Like… just swap who’s in control? Is this permanent?”

“Who knows?” Kamukura huffed, “Now, go back.” _He kicked Hajime in the leg._

~

“Ouch…” Hajime was lying in bed.

“Hajime?” Komaeda was sitting up, holding the covers tightly in his hands, “You… Kamukura was back for a bit…”

“Sorry, we were testing something.” Hajime sat up too, “I guess we can sort of switch… I wonder if we can control it…” He shoved that musing away, “Regardless, come back down here, we’re snuggling.”

Tugging Komaeda down was easy. He flopped down limp, into Hajime’s arms. Giving a content hum, Hajime snuggled Komaeda, holding him tightly.

“So, tell me what I missed.”

That seemed to kick start Komaeda’s brain. Hajime snuggled closer and listened to Komaeda slowly begin to speak.

~

They stayed in bed for majority of the morning, both of their classes long forgotten. The events from
So, wait, he actually likes spicy food?” Hajime gaped in horror, “I… I can’t believe that.”

“No, no it’s all true.” Komaeda laughed, “Ask him yourself later if you wish.”

Hajime nodded, “I will have to confirm from the source.”

“You can do that.” Komaeda curled his hands in Hajime’s hair, “Also, you should at least tell everyone you’re back.”

Right. Hajime didn’t want to leave Komaeda’s arms, but he half prompted himself up and reached for his phone. The small light in the corner blinked, indicating a message. Hajime looked. It was a message from Owari. He nearly dropped his phone.

“What’s wrong?” Komaeda immediately tried to sit up.

Hajime fell down; it was less awkward this way. “Owari thinks… no she says… Nidai remembers something.”

“She’s serious?” Komaeda gasped out, “Though it’s about time I suppose.”

“Good.” Hajime sighed, “Dancing around is hard. I suppose this means we’re going to meet up?”

“Guess we’re saying good bye to study time.” Komaeda sighed.

They met in Hanamura’s restaurant, apparently their go-to place that wasn’t a house. Hajime didn’t mind; Hanamura always fed them and that, he found, helped ease discussions about strange connecting dreams.

Everyone was there, much to Hajime’s delight. Sure, a text saying he was back was good, but seeing his friends was better. Minus Souda, this was the first time in a while. Grinning at the thought, he barely took a few steps when Owari and Mioda tackled him, hugging him tightly. Hajime flailed.

“Hello…” He wheezed.

“Hey Hajiji!” Owari chirped.

“Hey Hajime-chan!” Mioda said at the same time.

“If you keep doing that he’ll collapse.” Komaeda thankfully saved him.

“Naw, Haji is stronger than that!” Owari let him go all the same, before slapping him on the back.

Nidai wasn’t present yet, but Hajime knew that wouldn’t last for long. Heading to the table, he pulled out his worn sketchbook, perhaps showing it to a new person for the last time, and smiled. So many memories were woven in his art, in the sketches and memories from the others. He could still remember back in high school, when Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama had cornered him, effectively cornering Souda too. It felt so long ago, another life time, but it was documented in this book.

The confusion, the terror at the dreams was washing away. Even the hostile change in personality was slowly dimming away. Saionji had conquered it. Kuzuryuu had too. Perhaps, the others would too, should they show signs again or for the first time. This time however, they were prepared. They knew what to do.
The door to the restaurant opened, Nidai walking in, eyes widening at the group. Hajime wished they didn’t look like an interrogation squad, but they probably did. Too late to fix that. Owari however, stood up, and brightly waved.

“Hey Nidai, over here!”

As if there were anywhere else to go. Nidai squared his shoulders and walked over, sitting down firmly, right in the center.

“So!” His voice boomed, “Owari says that these dreams are mutual?”

“Yeah, they are.” Sonia nodded.

“We’re all plagued by past illusions in the realm of sleep.” Tanaka added, “Fortunately with the guidance of our comrades, we’re conquering and taming these dreams and nightly spells that force us to become different beings.”

Someone, possibly Sonia, opened their mouths to translate, but Nidai simply laughed, “I see, I see, so not only does everyone dream, everyone has met a different version of themselves?”

“Most of us have.” Mitarai confirmed, “However, with Saionji and Kuzuryuu…”


Well… they should have been less surprised. Hajime held a laugh as he pushed his sketchbook closer to Nidai, “Well, if that’s the case, let’s show you what we got and perhaps, hear the dream you’ve had.”

~

It was dark by the time they finished. Everyone was slowly packing up. Hajime lingered, watching everyone. Sonia and Tanaka were huddled close, his arm around her shoulders. Koizumi and Saionji had their hands laced, Kuzuryuu and Pekoyama were standing close, and Owari was hovering around Nidai. Mitarai and Tsumiki were off the side, talking with Hanamura and Mioda while Komaeda was talking with Souda, possibly about staying the night again.

Something felt closed in his heart. Hajime held his sketchbook close to his chest. This… as far as they knew, was one of the last people from their dreams. They didn’t have to search for each other anymore, or worry about spilling something. It almost felt surreal, not possible to reach this goal. It seemed to radiate from the group too. It was as though no one wanted to leave. Hajime closed his eyes and savoured the feeling of the room, taking a small piece and pressing it into his heart.

“Clinging to memories only makes us foolishly drunk on nostalgia.”

Hajime stiffened at the voice in his head, but relaxed, “There is nothing wrong with a bit of nostalgia, Kamukura.”

“If you say so…”

He vanished. Hajime opened his eyes, only to find Nidai standing by him. Hajime stepped back. “Uh sorry, hello. Nice to see you again.”

“It’s been a while.” Nidai confirmed, his voice low, “I haven’t seen you since the volunteering at the
Wait. What? Hajime stared. But… Komaeda had said…

“Sorry, was that a secret?” Nidai asked, sheepishly rubbing his head, “I just… knew the moment you walked in it wasn’t you.”

Oh. Hajime flushed. Apparently… Kamukura didn’t fool him.

“That isn’t my fault.”

“Ah… I see…” Hajime ignored Kamukura. “My apologies. We at the time weren’t sure how to tell you about my… situation.”

“That’s fine.” Nidai assured, “So, may I ask who it was that I met?”

“Kamukura.” Hajime responded, “He’s… kind of a package deal with me now. Apparently.”

“I resent being called a package deal. I’m not some holiday special.”

“Interesting.” Nidai mused, “Oh well. Stranger things have happened.”

… just what did Nidai qualify as something stranger? Hajime didn’t ask. Or, more accurately, he didn’t want to know.

~

Hajime waited until they were at his place, in his room, away from prying eyes, before he spoke.

“He knew.” Hajime laughed, “Nidai knew.”

“Knew what?” Komaeda asked, “I’m confused.”

“You missed it.” Hajime told him, flopping onto Komaeda’s bed, “But Nidai told me he knew it wasn’t me the last time we saw each other.”

Komaeda blinked before his eyes widened, “So… he knew it was Kamukura?”

“Apparently.” Hajime laughed, “I guess Kamukura didn’t do as great of a job pretending to be me.”

“Or, Nidai is very perceptive.” Komaeda shot back, “Regardless, I suppose it doesn’t matter now. He remembers, so we didn’t sound crazy when we finally explained.”

“You’re right.” Hajime nodded before reaching his hand out, “Come here.”

“Okay?” Komaeda took his hand.

Hajime tugged and pulled Komaeda, causing him to flop into him. Hajime laughed as Komaeda gasped out, shooting a playful glare.

“Hajime…”

He shut Komaeda up by kissing him, pressing deeply. Komaeda scrambled, returning the kiss, nipping a bit at Hajime’s lip, before they kissed again and again, wet sounds filling the air. When they parted, Hajime could feel his cheeks warm and Komaeda huff against his lips.

“Say… it’s been a while…” Hajime slowly said.
“And Kazuichi said he’s going to hang out with Mitarai and Tsumiki for the evening…”

Hajime didn’t let Komaeda finish his sentence, he kissed him harshly.

~

Epilogue

“I’m just grateful,” Hajime carefully spoke aloud, “That you didn’t mess up my final projects.”

“I’ll have you know I was designed to be the Ultimate Hope. I can do anything.”

“Yeah, except figure out how to stop taking over my body.” Hajime retorted, “Or being able to answer me when I ask if this arrangement is permanent.”

“Quit your complaining and get a move on. Volunteering for Tsumiki was nice and all, but don’t you dare switch out with me.”

“What? Ultimate Child Wrangler isn’t a talent you possess?”

“According to Souda, I make you look a million times more terrifying, something he didn’t think was possible.”

“You’re worried you’ll make the kids cry?” Hajime cooed, “Aw…”

“Shut up and go register. Other wise the nurses will think something is wrong with you.”

“Fine, fine…” Hajime sighed and walked into the hospital.

As usual, the space was crowded with people, nurses and other staff bustling around. Hajime skillfully dodged a family and headed to the table, with a sign reading “VOLUNTEER REGISTRY”. Beside the table was Komaeda, Nidai, and Owari, who all waved.

“Hajiji you’re here! And late!”

“I was busy handing in projects.” Hajime protested.

He signed the form and took the volunteer lanyard, stepping back. Nidai knew where they were going. Turning around firmly to join his friends, Hajime took a step and ran into someone rather short. His heart stopped. A child. Oops. He flinched and took a wide step back, hands flailing.

The child was a girl, with short hair cropped into a bob that curled near her ears. Her clothing was baggy, though Hajime could see a hint of a cast on her arm. His heart stopped. He had run into a kid with a broken arm. How much worse could this get?

“Are you okay?” Hajime blurted out, “I’m sorry I didn’t mean to…”

She looked up, her eyes calm, no sign of discomfort, “That’s all right mister.”

Hajime opened his mouth to say something, but a dash of two people, definitely her parents, appeared in his line of sight.

“Chiaki, sweetie, there you are!” The woman rushed over, carefully hugging her, “I’m sorry.”

“No, no I’m the one who should apologize. I accidentally ran into her.” Hajime assured, “I’m sorry again.” He directed at her.
“What do you say Chiaki?” Her father was now with them.

“Thank you, mister. It’s fine.” Chiaki said before she turned to her parents, “Can we get ice cream now?”

“Of course, sweetie.” Her father gently rubbed her head, “Sorry again.”

They left. Hajime waved, smiling, when a sudden stab in his chest filled him. He dropped his arm and looked down, as if he’d see physical damage. The pain spread to his head, dull and throbbing. Hajime frowned.

“Kamukura? Is something wrong?”

“… no…. I just… Never mind. Get going. Everyone is waiting.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just… go.”

Hajime sighed. The pain receded, and Kamukura now deep in his mind. Questions formed in his head, but those would have to wait for later. For now, he had some volunteering to do. Walking to his friends, who were still waiting thankfully.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

“Bullying children now?” Komaeda poked at him, “Is that girl okay?”

“Yeah… she was fine. Her parents were fine too.” Hajime answered, rolling his eyes at Komaeda’s accusation, “And I wasn’t doing anything. It was an accident.”

“Right.” Komaeda took his hand, “Let’s go.”

Hajime nodded, but found himself looking back, to the front of the hospital. Chiaki and her parents were, of course, long gone, but for some reason, when he thought of that, his heart seized, and tears wanted to fill his eyes. What emotion was mixed in, Hajime didn’t know, but for now, he let contentment take the lead.

“Hajime? Are you crying?” Komaeda’s voice was soft.

“Oh…” He was?

“Everything okay?”

“Yes.” Hajime found himself answering smoothly, “I just… I think I’m happy?”

“Happy?” Komaeda raised an eyebrow, “Okay… better dry those happy tears. We got volunteering to do.”

Hajime laughed and wiped his face, nodding, “Yeah, let’s go.”

“Together.” Komaeda said.

“Together.” Hajime agreed.
Aquarium: I just think... aquariums are adorable date spots...

Thai Food: I don't know why, I just think of Hajime not liking spicy food entirely.

Green Tea: I just think of Kuzuryuu having an impressive collection of tea.

Maps: Souda was playing FE Heroes because that is what I wasted time on instead of writing.

Chiaki: I legit had zero plans for adding her in, but somehow, she made it in, at the end.

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