Mysteries and Mutual Killing

by Unironicdokis

Summary

For something that was right up Mukuro's alley, these were not exactly the kind of mysteries that she looked forward to solving. Sure, her classmates were—at least overall—rather nice, and the prospect of reuniting with her twin sister was something she had been waiting for with anticipation, but that only made her feel so much worse about her current predicament. //

Talentswap au [reimaging of the game: new culprits, new victims!] | [spoiler] Ultimate Detective Mukuro protagonist | Despair Sisters | Mukuro/Makoto & Mukuro/Kyoko | Spoilers for DR1
Beware: Lots of DR spoilers! The protagonist's existence is literally a spoiler!

Like I said, new victims, new culprits! Mystery Mastermind! So if you're looking for more content similar to the game, I hope you'll enjoy this!

Even if a ship is tagged, it's probably going to be at most just heavily implied (edit: I lied, Mukuro/Kyoko is gonna be endgame), but my biases definitely come through. Hope you enjoy!

1st person POV b/c I want to mimic the style of the original game

Edit: At the time I began this, there was hardly any Mukuro content. There's slightly more now, I would consider this a heavy re-imagining and re-interpretation of her character.
The building stood before me, taller and much more intimidating than I had ever imagined. The sun, climbing high in the sky as the day moved onward, caused it to cast a dark shadow over me as I gazed upward in awe. Kibougamine Academy, or as it more commonly known, Hope’s Peak... It was said that attending was a near guarantee for success in life. Students do not apply, they are recruited. Only the best of the best had the chance attend. And, to my utter amazement, I had been recruited for this upcoming class for my talents as the Ultimate Detective.

In a place like this, there had to be at least a few good mysteries worth solving. Naturally, as any good detective ought, I had made sure to do plenty of research beforehand. The forums on the school website had all but ensured me that my class was full of all sorts of fascinating characters.

An Ultimate Moral Compass rumored to be a pushover?

A swimmer who does not attend a single practice?

An Ultimate Good Luck who had marks more outstanding than the majority of the supposed "gifted" students?

A gambler whose luck knows no bounds?

As intimidated as I was by the whole process, I was itching to meet my classmates. What sort of secrets would I uncover at my stay here?

Well, at the very least, I knew I had one mystery worth uncovering--Junko Enoshima.

If truth be told, I had always been curious about my baby sister, but to think that she had grown up to become an Ultimate Pop Sensation was almost unfathomable. And to discover the truth in this way? To be reunited like this, recruited by the exact same exclusive private school?

It had seemed too crazy, too farfetched to be the truth, like a scenario straight out of a cheesy movie or a bad fanfiction. On the other hand, she sounded so happy when she wrote to me that I desperately wanted to believe her, despite my doubts. I mean, it wasn't every day you received a letter from a superstar--who also happened to be your long lost sister.

Of course, upon this new development, I did my usual poking around. Mother had always been unusually cryptic about my past. Well, perhaps not so unusual for her. Privacy just seemed to be a Ikusaba family trait. Still the truth was never hidden from me for long. As far as I could tell, it was, indeed, the truth.

Junko Enoshima, Ultimate Pop Sensation, was my baby twin sister.

Still standing outside the school, I hugged my arms close to my chest, trying to get a grip as I took slow, deep breaths. I did not want to show it, but I was nervous. It was more than just my classmates I had to impress; it was my sister, too.

Maybe I was being ridiculous. It was uncharacteristic for me to care so much about what others thought of me. The job of a detective was to be invisible, after all. I would be professional and nothing more. Being impressive? It never seemed important before, but this was my sister after
all—my family. It was as if I was sprouting a new and unfamiliar desire to gain her approval.

What would she think of me? Would she be happy to have me as a big sister?

Or would I be a disappointment?

Well, the only way to find out would be to press forward. According to the orientation letter, new students were supposed to gather in the entrance hall at 8. I was a little early, but in the end, I decided it would be better to wait inside. It was definitely a step up from waiting by the entrance, standing outside the gates like a lost child.

I opened the large, intimidating double doors—fit for such a large, intimidating school—and took my first steps inside my new school and home.

I took my first step into the empty hall and then...

Everything went black.

When I finally woke, it was to the sight of an unfamiliar and otherwise empty classroom. It was dimly lit, but in my stupor I could make out the steel plates bolted to the walls--too tired for the panic to set in just yet. Before confusion could fully take hold, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a note on one of the desks.

Cautiously, I picked it up, taking note of the hastily scribbled handwriting. There was something ominous about the note, but it was the only clue I was given in an otherwise empty room.

"Welcome to your new life at Hope's Peak Academy! Meet in the entrance hall at 8:00 for a welcoming ceremony! Don't be late!"

Strange.

I weighed my options. On the one hand, there was something clearly suspicious about this cryptic and informal message. On the other hand, what else was I to do? I was still weighing my options when I checked the clock. It was already five after 8.

Well, it's the only lead I've got so far.

My decision was made. Having no other indications of my circumstances, I figured I better head over to the entrance hall.

Outside the empty classroom, the corridors were just as dimly lit, giving them an ominous feel. The hall was silent, except for the sound of my footsteps against the tile floor. I walked slowly and cautiously, for fear of getting lost, but my tardiness did not escape me. Still, I wanted to take note of my environment. I needed to know my surroundings, just as a safety precaution.

When I opened the door to the entrance hall, I was greeted by the faces of confused and disgruntled students.

My curiosity had once again arisen.

What was going on? Were these my classmates, the incoming 78th class?
The boy nearest to the door let out a relieved sigh, "Oh! Looks like that must be everyone then! So then... That makes 16 of us in total." He was short with messy brown hair and an ahoge, and he was dressed in a white uniform.

"Did you wake up in an empty classroom, too?" asked a tan girl with a high ponytail and knee brace. The tall blond next to her sneered. "Well, that was obvious. We all did."

I didn't answer, too overwhelmed by the bombarding questions and new faces.

The first boy shook his head, obviously wanting to avoid any conflict. "Never mind that. Let's give the newcomer their space. Well..." He looked around before turning back to me. "I think since you're late, introductions are in order."

He held out his hand, smiling with a warmth that reached his light green eyes, and was so genial it was almost comforting.

"I'm Makoto Naegi, Ultimate Moral Compass. Pleased to meet you!"

He seemed nice enough, and it was a relief to know that despite the talent here, not all the students were quite so cutthroat. I'd heard about Makoto. He was one of the less frequent mentions on the forums. The athletes and stars obviously were the ones who got the most attention. Being a good student wasn't much fuel to stir gossip. He was rumored to be impossibly sweet, but also a bit of a pushover. Still, there were anecdotes about his skills in conflict resolution. I could see where the people were coming from. He gave off good vibes.

Still, I was hesitant to let down my guard too soon.

But there was something about the way he smiled.

I took his hand tentatively, nodding curtly. "Mukuro Ikusaba. Ultimate Detective."

"Neat!" said Makoto. "Well, I'd better give everyone else an opportunity to introduce themselves as well." He turned to the student beside him. "Leon!" And just like that, he was gone.

Although I didn't want to admit it, I was slightly disappointed. After all, he seemed like a nice kid. I wouldn't have minded having a chat with him. Still, I supposed there'd be time for that later. Before I even really had time to register his absence, he was shortly replaced by a boy with flaming red hair.

"Hey! The name's Leon Kuwata! Nice to meetcha." He flashed a wide grin.

Leon Kuwata?

"Wait, so you're that prodigy swimmer everyone's been talking about?" I realized that my incredulous tone probably sounded rude, but his appearance had me taken aback.

At first glance he hardly seemed to be the typical student athlete type. He had an athletic build, lithe, but toned, ideal for a swimmer. Still, upon further inspection, something was definitely off. With his spiked hair and a goatee, leather jacket, and multiple piercings, he looked much more like a punk than any jock I'd ever seen. (Although to be fair, I didn't exactly have the traditional middle school experience). Still, underneath all the rocker edge, you could still make out a pretty, boyish face and a winning smile.

I could appreciate his aesthetic, even if it walked the line between being cool and trying too hard. Then again, what did I really know about style? I certainly had none.
He seemed a bit put off by my response, as I'd predicted. "Did you expect some revved up jock? Nah man, I hate swimming. That's why I came here, so I could have a fresh start."

I introduced myself as well. He seemed friendly if a little apathetic, but that was the general response I expected. He'd done the quick glance up and down, and I knew I'd been dismissed, but it didn't bother me. He talked, and I was listening absentmindedly.

"So I want to start this band. What do you think? I got the look, right?"

I nodded. Day one and he was already going on about his dream (which was apparently to become a musician), but I didn't mind. It was kind of funny actually. He was telling me about his bass when I felt a light tap on my shoulder.

I turned to face a gorgeous girl with long, silky blue hair, accessorized with an ornate pink bow.

"Leon, give the girl a break, she just got here. Don't tell me you've already confessed that you hate swimming! You only just met her!"

She giggled, turning to address me.

"Pleased to meet you! I'm Sayaka Maizono!"

Her uniform was modified—skirt airing on the almost too short side with a loose tie around her neck, and... was that a bralette peaking through her shirt? Her clothes definitely made a statement—the lace, the thigh-highs, the hair pins. Cute, but also confident. Detailed, but not over the top.

Something about her face seemed oddly familiar....

"I've seen you before!" My calm composure was broken as the realization hit me. So much for keeping cool. But I had definitely seen her somewhere. The long blue hair, the wide, earnest bright eyes, the delicate ivory skin. "You're all over the magazine covers! That would make you... Ultimate Fashionista?"

Sayaka laughed once more. "Guilty!"

I sighed, like an idiot paying no mind to how my admiring gaze would come across.

She was certainly very enchanting. Stunning, even. I was suddenly very self conscious of my own appearance, something I usually paid little mind. But in comparison to her, I did feel a bit like a shrinking violet. If she noticed my reservation, she did not acknowledge it.

"It has been so nice to meet you!" said Sayaka. "By the way, I just wanted to say, I love your hair!"

"Really?"

"Yeah! It is so sleek and easy. It's very 'in' right now."

I flushed, stuttering a thank you in response. It certainly didn't compare to hers, but who was I to deny praise from a model?

We engaged in small-talk for a little while longer. She was very easy to talk to; on the other hand, just being the same room made my self-esteem take a serious hit.

However, since I knew I could not spend too much time on any one person, I reluctantly allowed for her good-byes as I moved onto the next student: a boy in blazer uniform over a green hoodie.
He had heavy eyebrows in a perpetual scowl and short, inky-black hair. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mukuro Ikusaba! My name is Kiyotaka Ishimaru, but you can call me Taka! Let us work together on our educational crusade!"

His scowl shifted, replaced by a huge, beaming smile. That definitely made him seem more approachable, but it didn't affect his speech, which was still very deliberate and, well, assertive.

"You are the Ultimate Detective, are you not?" He spoke in an intense manner, loud and to the point, for a moment I was too overwhelmed to speak.

I managed a response. "That would be me."

I racked my brain to see if that name rang any bells. Kiyotaka Ishimaru...

"And you are... the Ultimate Lucky Student?"

He bristled. I seemed to have struck a nerve with him, and I couldn't help but wonder what I had done wrong.

"Yes, I am the Ultimate Lucky Student. But I will have you know, Mukuro, that I fully intend to prove that I deserve a place at this school along with all the other talented students! It is shameful having to rely on such a thing as good luck."

I privately wondered if the glare was because he was annoyed or if his eyebrows were perpetually fixed into that intimidating scowl.

"Well, Taka—"

Before I could get in a word, I was interrupted by a booming voice.

"Taka? As in Kiyotaka Ishimaru?"

A tall, muscular boy in a white tank and a jean vest came forward, sporting the most ridiculous haircut that I had ever seen. If truth be told, it held more of a resemblance to corn than to actual hair, since it was bleached on top and styled way too far in front of his face with liberal amounts of hair gel. It would have been laughable if fear of his reaction didn't hold me back. He seemed jovial enough, but it was better not to push my luck. "Mondo Owada, Ultimate Martial Artist."

His focus was more on Taka than myself although I must say, I hardly minded. I wasn't particularly keen on diverting his attention.

At once, Taka became rather flustered. "That sounds familiar, but I—"

Well, whether Taka remembered Mondo or not, I certainly knew who he was. Checking out the forums, I noticed that Mondo had gained quite a reputation for himself as a mixed martial arts fighter, taking the title from his brother while still in his teens. The guy was strong, sure, but more than that, he was quick-thinking and good on his feet. However, his impulsiveness had gotten him into some trouble, both in and out of the ring. According to the discussion forums, the guy apparently had quite a temper. It was best not to piss him off. All posts on him contained heavy warnings: do not cross him.

While I could see why someone would want to take heed (for the time being) Mondo remained in good spirits. He laughed, slapping Taka on the back, probably rather hard since it seemed to throw Taka off his center, his eyes bulging as he coughed and struggled to stay upright. Catching a better glance at his person, I noticed Mondo's arms bore lots and lots of bandage tape. "What, ya don't
remember me? Middle school? You're a sixer ain't ya? From Sixth Black Root Middle School, class two?"

Realization seemed to dawn over Taka, and he suddenly seemed very embarrassed, going red in the face. "Yes! Yes, of course! How could I have possibly let it slip my mind."

Mondo turned to face me again, for once acknowledging my presence. "Ya should'a seen this kid! He had a competitive edge strong enough to rival mine!"

*That would explain Taka's earlier behavior quite a bit...*

The guy certainly seemed eager to prove himself.

Mondo sighed, obviously disappointed about something. I was immediately on edge. I had a feeling that this guy was somebody I did not want to let down. "Aye... It's a shame. You're smaller than I remember, man. Looks like you're not fit to be my sparring partner."

Well, it was disappointing for Mondo, maybe, but a relief for myself. He hadn't even seemed to consider me as an option, which I found odd, but there was no way I was going to question him. Thankfully, I was saved from a response by a voice that came from behind. "If you are in need of a sparring partner, perhaps I can be of assistance?"

I turned to face whoever had spoken, and to my surprise, it was a slender girl with long hair of an indiscernible silvery lavender color, dressed all in black. Her expression, completely devoid of emotion, was familiar to me.

It was an expression one learned to master when dealing with secrets.

However, my job was secrets. I wondered what hers could be.

Before anyone could reply, she continued. "Let me know if you are interested." However, as she said this, she didn't look to either Mondo or Taka. Instead, her eyes met mine, and she smirked, glancing me up and down. She turned to leave the conversation almost as suddenly as she had entered it, Mondo and Taka trying not to gawk. As she walked away, she said, in a voice quiet yet full of authority, "Kyoko Kirigiri, Ultimate Soldier. Looking forward to it."

I took a liking to her immediately.

Looking back to Mondo, I could see he seemed sheepish. "Well, that was weird."

"Sure." I nodded, agreeing despite my intrigue. Zoning out of our conversation, I continued to stare in Kyoko's direction. There had been no mention of a Kyoko Kirigiri on any of the message boards.

A voice, male by the sound of it, and in a rather haughty tone, punctured the silence. "Is this going to take much longer, or are you planning to keep me waiting like this all morning?"

It was the tall blond in square specs from earlier. His arms were crossed, his posture upright and defiant, his gaze scathing. He wore a button up shirt and tie under his black hoodie. Everything about him, from his broad shoulders to his cross expression to the large headphones around his neck, read "disdain."

I tried my best to remain polite. "Apologies if I have kept you waiting, but there are quite a lot of people in here to meet."
Standing face to face, for some reason he seemed even taller than I remembered.

"Hmph." He seemed disgruntled.

I waited for him to continue, but he said nothing.

"Excuse me? I'm afraid I—"

"You are excused."

I was beginning to get fed up with this guy. "I don't believe I caught your name. Mukuro Ikusaba. And you are?" My tone was a little more forceful than was usually necessary, but he wasn't the only one whose patience was being tried.

"Bore someone else with your questions." He began to take his leave. "I'm done here. Byakuya Togami. Ultimate Programmer."

Yep. Another common name from the forums. He'd invented countless programs and was a pretty infamous hacker in the tech world. I knew shamefully little about computers or programming, but I supposed at least he had the intelligence to back up his air of superiority. Not that it was an excuse. He definitely had his fans, though. Maybe if they knew who he really was, they'd change their tune, but then again, maybe not. Techies could be devout.

A petite girl with short hair approached me next. She spoke to me in a feeble voice, so low that it was practically inaudible.

I leaned in. "Sorry, I didn't catch that?"

"Oh! I'm sorry... I said that it's nice to meet you. My name is Chihiro Fujisaki."

The way she said it, it was like she was almost ashamed of herself. I felt a little sorry for her.

Still, Chihiro Fujisaki? Now that was a name that rang a bell.

"Fujisaki? So that means you're the Ultimate Affluent Progeny? Heir to the entire Fujisaki Conglomerate?"

This meek little girl was to inherit that economic superpower?

And what was up with these "Ultimate" titles? "Ultimate Affluent Progeny"... Would calling her an "heir" really have been so difficult?

"I'm sorry... I'm not exactly what you were expecting, were you?" She looked close to tears.

"No, no, not at all!" I reassured her, not wanting to cause a scene. "I'm just a little surprised. I expected the heir to the Fujisaki conglomerate to be more like Ultimate Prick over there." I nodded in Byakuya's direction.

To my delight, she giggled, her mood cheering up considerably. Practically everything about her was adorable, from the multitudes of ruffles on her umbrella skirt to the suspenders to the impeccably tailored off-white cardigan. The ensemble was simple, but seemed deluxe. It was almost sickeningly sweet. "Thank goodness! I thought perhaps that you didn't like me!"

It had been quite some time since I had heard anything about the Fujisaki family. From what I could tell, they were extremely private people. I knew they had a son, but I didn't remember anything about a daughter. The forums had very little information on Chihiro Fujisaki. She was rumored to be very
brilliant and to have accumulated a fortune of her own, independent from her family company. Unlike most of the other Ultimates, she had been homeschooled for most of her life. However, apart from that, she mostly kept out of the public eye.

Seeing her petite, fragile figure, I could understand why she would want to keep to herself.

We exchanged a few more words before I parted ways. She was by far one of the more approachable people I'd met. Still, I did need to finish introductions.

I wondered how much more I would have to go through because all these over-the-top personalities were more than a little exhausting.

I approached a reserved-looking girl in braids next, and she stuttered her introduction. "I'm T-Toko. Toko Fukawa... Ultimate Fanfic Creator..." Everything about her attire was oversized; she wore a seifuku with a large, baggy skirt, and huge, round glasses with lenses made her eyes seem equally huge.

As she spoke, she avoided my eyes, fiddling with the tie around her neck in a nervous gesture. Instead of traditional scarf or a bow to go with her uniform, she wore a brightly patterned tie with assorted pins. They seemed to be merchandise for shows I certainly did not recognize. Anime, cartoons, dramas, stuff like that.

From what I knew of her, she had a pretty large following in many large fandom communities. Toko was famous for her "hurt/comfort" fic and other popular genres. But I'd seen some of her tamer art. She was very talented, I would give her that.

Although, I supposed saying that Toko Fukawa was famous for her fic was not entirely accurate. Rather, her pseudonym, "SunWitch RavenWay", was famous. She'd been publishing anonymously for years, and only fairly recently within the last few years had she finally opened up to the public after much speculation.

"So you write fan-fic?" I asked her, despite already knowing the answer. I was trying to make polite conversation more than anything else.

"Y-Y-Yes. And I d-draw fanart. N-not that—not that you'll even bother t-to remember."

"Well, that's pretty presumptuous of you, don't you think? I've seen your work. It's quite good."

My response seemed to have caught her off guard. Her stuttering worsened, eyes wide.

"Th-th-that's not what—that's not—that's not what I... W-Why are you—you asking m-me this? Is this an attack? It's b-because I'm ugly, isn't it? Not like a girl like you would have much room to talk..." She grit her teeth, glaring at me in anger and frustration.

Surprised by such sudden hostility, I tried not to let my hurt slip through. I generally thought of myself as someone with a thick skin, but the accusation still stung. I made a mental note about saying anything she could possibly take the wrong way. Perhaps it was just bad first impressions, but the girl had a bit of a possible persecution complex, probably a good thing for me to want to remember. I didn't want to step on anybody's toes. Furthermore, I didn't want to upset her.

Not wanting to belabor our introduction even further, I quickly attempted to detach myself from her presence.

In my haste to get out, I accidentally bumped into a large boy with glasses.
"Pardon me, Miss Mukuro Ikusaba. Allow me to introduce myself! Hifumi Yamada, Ultimate Writing Prodigy. You would do well to remember it."

Getting a better look at him, I could see he had short brown hair with a pointy ahoge, and was dressed in a casual cardigan and button-down. Despite the fact that we were in a school, he was the only one with a backpack.

Meeting my eyes, he smiled at me through puffy cheeks.

I quirked an eyebrow, mildly amused. Looks like I'd run into another ego. At least this one was polite enough...

"Hmm..." He scrutinized me, leaning in and squinting behind his thick-lensed glasses. "What sort of character are you, Miss Mukuro Ikusaba?... Black hair, impassive, humble appearance. You seem like the strong silent type!" He pointed a finger at me triumphantly. "A character as such would only feel at home in a noir murder mystery!"

I allowed myself a small chuckle. "Well, you aren't wrong."

He grinned, obviously pleased with himself.

"Although," he added, and I braced myself for more. "If we were in a noir, I do not think you would be a Femme Fatale... For that you would have to be attractive and mysterious!"

I sighed, but said nothing. There always had to be a catch. Sixteen students of incredible talent, yet none of them could have a normal conversation with kids their own age.

That was probably too harsh. After all, the guy was a famous novelist. At the very least, that was impressive. His romance novels were always best-selling hits, climbing to the top of the charts. He'd received plenty of awards and praise, but with his fame he'd also acquired a decent number of critics as well.

I'd been sucked into an unwilling long-winded and one-sided conversation with Hifumi when I made eye-contact with a tall, muscular girl who stood across the room.

Possibly noticing my distress, she approached me, cutting in between me and Hifumi. "I do not believe we have met."

"Right!" I squeaked. I was intimidated by her large frame—however grateful I was at her intrusion.

She addressed Hifumi. "Pardon me, I would like a moment to introduce myself to the new student."

Hifumi, perhaps equally intimidated, nodded and hastily backed away.

"I apologize for interrupting," she said, shaking what was supposed to be my hand. However, with the amount of unintended force, it felt more like my entire arm.

"It's no trouble," I said, although when she let go, I took a moment to flex my fingers, and massage my wrist, making sure the thing still worked.

"Sakura Ogami, Ultimate Biker Gang Leader."

From my research, she was another one of those Ultimates most people warned to "Stay Away!", but she wasn't really what I had expected of a gang leader at all. At first glance she was intimidating, certainly, what with the scar across her face and large black embroidered coat, but I was surprised.
She was nothing but polite and reserved. Her long white hair fell down to her waist, such a pretty note in an otherwise intimidating lady. She'd gained respect from her gang as well as other biker gangs through the country, and now I could see why.

She definitely had a commanding presence. Just her voice alone commanded authority.

Another girl that I'd spotted chatting to Sakura earlier approached us, introducing herself to me. She was a stark contrast to Sakura: smiling, tan, curvy and muscular, athletic in both build and attire, and very pretty, with a pony tail that practically defied gravity. "Hiya! Sakura, who is this?"

"Hello, Hina. This is Mukuro Ikusaba. She is a detective."

The girl's eyes went wide. "That is so cool! And I see you've already met Sakura."

"Yes, do you two know each other?"

Sakura shook her head, and Hina laughed.

"Actually, no! Is that what you thought? We just met."

I was surprised. The way they seemed to bounce back and forth off each other, it was like they already had an established rapport. Like they'd been friends for years.

The girl smiled at me. "I'm Aoi Asahina, Ultimate All Star! But my friends just call me Hina."

Her talent would not have been difficult to guess. Simply put, she was quite a ball of energy.

She chuckled, fidgeting awkwardly. "Hehe... What was your name again? Must've slipped my mind," asked Hina.

I smiled patiently as I responded. She frowned and muttered something quietly to herself, apparently deep in thought. I parted with the two of them. Seeing Sakura and Hina together, I realized I was already the third wheel, and that I'd better be on my way.

Sakura Ogami and Aoi Asahina were definitely two names I recognized. As an athletic star, I could see why recruiting Hina was a must. The real puzzle was trying to work out why the school would recruit an outlaw biker, even the best one in the country.

In the end I figured the school must have its reasons, so I decided not to dwell on it further, at least for the time being.

Still, Sakura's recruitment continued to be odd. Hina on the other hand was a figure growing in popularity in the sports crowd. It was not a surprise to me at all that she was here. She and Leon seemed to be clumped together a lot, labeled as the "rising stars". While Leon Kuwata was the prodigy swimmer, Aoi Asahina was famous for being dedicated as well as multi-talented. Oh, and their good looks didn't hurt either. Neither of them were particularly my type, but I could see the appeal. Hina, after years of jumping from sport to sport, finally settled on softball, earning her the title "Ultimate All Star". While everyone was anticipating for Leon to eventually compete in the Olympics (something that seemed more and more like a dwindling possibility after my conversation with him), Hina was already being scouted for the big leagues.

Still, so much of the conversation surrounding Hina was dominated by her looks. It was kind of depressing. Female athletes already got less recognition than male ones, but Leon was recognized for his talent; Hina for her appearance.
My train of thought was interrupted when I remembered my goal. My eyes fell upon a deathly pale
girl with red eyes and impossibly long black hair with severe bangs. I shook my head, clearing my
thoughts. Introductions, right. Introductions.

Still, I was hesitant to approach her. Something about her was ominous. It wasn't really anything
physical, even though she was somewhat gothic. The girl wore an elegant, flowy, loose dress
consisting of many layers and fabrics, all dark in color. It was like a costume, very ornate, very over-
the-top. She looked just like the animatronics in those glass boxes, the ones that supposedly tell your
future. It was more her air than anything else.

"Mukuro Ikusaba." I kept it short.

"Greetings, Mukuro Ikusaba. My name is Celestia Ludenberg, but you may call me Celeste." Her
smile, while on the surface appeared perfectly normal, had a strange, eerie feel to it.

"Pleased to meet you."

I decided not to address the name. It certainly wasn't Japanese, but that would be a question for later,
if at all. It probably would've been in poor taste to ask, especially right off the bat.

"The pleasure is all mine," said Celeste. "I am the Ultimate Clairvoyant, as you probably already
guessed. Would you care to know your fortune, Miss Ikusaba? I see quite interesting things in your
future." She giggled behind her hand, the nails black and filed into sharp points, her slender fingers
covered in rings. Her laughter seemed innocent enough, but the sound was positively unnerving.

I definitely wanted to move on.

Next was a boy with dreads that stuck out in practically every direction. Judging by his face and
barest trace of stubble on his chin, he seemed much older than the other students. His black coat
hung loosely over his shoulders, and was embroidered in great detail. His entire existence looked as
if it disobeyed the laws of physics.

"Hey!" He put up a hand in a small wave. "I'm Yasuhiro Hagakure. Just Hiro though, 'right? Good
ta meet you, Mukuro! Ultimate Gambler, that's me! Take it easy, I know I will!" He grinned hugely.

He was yet another familiar name. Hiro Hagakure, high school student who was known for robbing
thousands, even millions away from unlucky gamblers in a single night. He was quite infamous in
the underworld for leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. One of the more ridiculous rumors
claimed he'd never lost a single bid. The strategy he used to leave everyone in the dust was a topic
discussed at length within the forums. No matter how much discussion and thought was put into it,
not a single person could figure it out.

He was truly a curious case for me. One of the few students who had already managed to spark my
interest.

It was like everything about him was designed to throw me off. He was in high school, yet appeared
to be thirty. The black coat looked luxe, so ornate and detailed and unique, but it also had obvious
patch-work. His manner was laid back, almost like a stoner, but his laugh was enthused. He seemed
nice enough, but there was a glint of mania in his eye. He gesticulated with his arms, but his coat
never left his shoulders. He clearly had money, but his jewelry looked like the hemp bracelets from a
yoga studio.

And then there were the shoes.

The most ridiculous, decadent display of wealth in shoes with a gold-plated toe that made them seem
like armor or scales.

Oh, the questions in store...

"Ultimate Gambler, is that even legal?"

He laughed. It was loud and boisterous, shoulders shaking up and down. He was absolutely jovial.
"It is for me, dude! I'm twenty-one! Not that it even stopped me much before, yeah?"

A twenty year old still in high school?

"Aye, well don't say it like that..." He sighed in dismay. "The way I see it, this school is my chance to start over, yeah?"

I hadn't realized that I had spoken my thoughts out loud. Before I could stop myself, I flushed a light shade of pink, thoroughly embarrassed. I muttered a quiet apology, wanting to sink right through the floor and disappear. However, he seemed hardly fazed by my words or embarrassment, his good nature hardly deterred at all. Nevertheless, I excused myself to go, trying in vain to regain my composure.

That was when I heard a girl's voice behind me.

An unfamiliar voice.
The sixteenth voice.
The last student I had yet to meet.

"So, sis, what on earth took you so long?"

I turned.

"Junko? Junko Enoshima?"

She laughed, the sound pleasant and melodious. She was everything and more. "That's right! And you're my big sis, Mukuro Ikusaba! Don't tell me that I'm mistaken, that'd be embarrassing."

Somehow she managed to be simultaneously intimidating and yet completely charming. Her appearance seemed to be taken straight from the cover of a magazine or an idol book: strawberry blonde hair; expressive blue eyes; a white, even smile; smooth, porcelain skin. She was just the ideal Ultimate Pop Sensation. Such a contrast to my own appearance: heavily-hooded eyes—despite them being the same shade of blue; my short, black and bob-cut—practical but plain; and lastly my sallow complexion and permanent dark circles, appropriate only for a very sleep-deprived Ultimate Detective.

Before I knew it, I was being crushed in a tight hug. "I've always wanted a big sister! It's so good to finally meet you!"

I smiled awkwardly as I tried to return the hug. "It's nice to finally meet you as well. It has been quite some time." That was the understatement of the century, but it was the best I could do. As pleased as I was to meet her as well, I'd never been good at handling affection—not that I received much in the first place.

Before the two of us could even attempt to catch up, a high pitched noise rang throughout the room, painfully sharp to the ears.
Looking around the entrance hall I could see the same anxious and perplexed look on everybody's faces.

"What's going on?" asked Junko, her tone hushed.

I shook my head in response, unsure myself.

The voice came again, only now we could detect that the source was from the speakers set up in the corners of the hall.

"There is an assembly in the gym. Everybody head there straight away!"

--

It did not take long for the sixteen of us to congregate in the gym.

Waiting in anxious anticipation, we looked around, taking in the scenery as some of us spoke in hushed whispers about our suspicions.

I was--Well, we all were--beginning to get rather antsy, waiting for something—anything—to happen when at last...

Something sprang out from behind the podium.

Black and white, rather small, and looking exactly like a teddy bear, it would have been completely comical under normal circumstances. Instead, my only reaction was the chills.

"A toy bear?" Makoto asked the question that surely was on everyone's mind. His confusion and anxiety was apparent on his face. It mirrored the rest of our expressions.

"I'm not a toy! I'm Monokuma, your new headmaster!"

The voice came from the thing standing at the podium, whatever it was. Ridiculous, high-pitched, & almost amusing, as if from a kid's cartoon. Instead, it was grating.

At hearing the toy speak, several of the students gasped.

"The stuffed toy talks?" cried Hifumi in shock.

However, some students, like Byakuya and Kyoko, remained completely impassive.

"I told you, I'm not a toy! Listen up, you bastards! As your new headmaster, I've come to the conclusion that this school is way too boring. So... This year, we're doing things a little differently."

It's single red eye flashed dangerously.

"Who are you? What is the meaning of this?" Kyoko's voice, cold and intimidating, broke through the silence, the one person brave enough to challenge him.

"I told you, I'm Monokuma! I'm the headmaster of this school, and I have a very important announcement."

Whatever this was, I did not like the sound of it one bit.
"Starting this semester, you guys are going to be spending the rest of your lives here."

*What?*

My thoughts were echoed aloud by several people in the room. Looking around, I could see the anxious expressions of nearly everyone.

"Ahaha, good one!" Hiro laughed, and some of the others shot him disbelieving looks.

Perhaps he did believe it, but the sound wasn't convincing. I got the feeling that deep down, he knew the truth. Or, well, maybe he really was an idiot.

Truly, it seemed too outlandish to be true, yet something about the bear's behavior, despite his light, airy tone, told us that he was completely serious.

At this, it's tone became more irritated, clearly antagonized. "I am serious! Welcome to the rest of your lives!" Monokuma paused dramatically. "Unless of course, you want to graduate."

*Graduate?*

"G-graduate?"

Next voice to speak up was Toko's nervous stutter, voicing mine and everyone else's thought aloud.

As promising as that sounded, there had to be a catch.

"Yes!" said Monokuma. "Graduation is such a special time in a person's life. It's really quite the ceremony! I remember mine like it was only yesterday." If it was a joke, it didn't land. "However, each student must meet the qualifications! That's just the way things work around here. So... In order to graduate, you have to kill someone!"

Dead silence. It was as if a hush fell over the students.

At last, Chihiro asked in a quiet, feeble voice, "Kill each other? But—"

"Cutting, stabbing, smashing, burning, poisoning, choking, doesn't matter how! All that matters is that in order to leave this place, that's what you have to do! As long as you don't get caught of course." Monokuma was positively gushing with excitement. It was nauseating.

Mondo clenched his fists, his jaw set in anger. "'Ey, what the fuck do ya think you're playing at? Cut the crap with this sick joke!" He looked ready to pounce.

"Joke? Are you sure you aren't referring to your hair?" Monokuma asked, in such an mocking tone that would have been laughable--under different circumstances.

Mondo's face began to burn red in embarrassment and frustration. But as his hulking figure approached Monokuma, his rage was legitimately terrifying. In that moment, I was ready to believe every single terrifying rumor about him. No doubt I was right in assuming he was not someone to cross.

"Listen here, you—"

Before he could do anything, he was cut off by Makoto, who had (either bravely or foolishly) stepped up and was barring the way between Monokuma and the fighter with a panicked look on his face.
"Mondo, please! Let's not overreact! We mustn't fight!"

It occurred to me just then how much smaller Makoto was than Mondo.

Unfortunately for Makoto, Mondo seemed far from calmed. Rather than mellowing out, his attention simply averted from Monokuma to the hall monitor. "You tryna tell me what to do kid?" He practically screamed in the kid's face.

Makoto waved his arms frantically in front of him, trying to backtrack. "No! No, that's not what I—"

There was a sickening smack, and before anyone realized exactly what had happened, Mondo punched Makoto so hard he fell to the ground with a loud thud. He lay still on the ground, clearly blacked out.

"At least it was a short trip to the ground," I heard Junko say quietly, snickering. I considered chastising her, but in the end, I let it go, too shocked to truly have the voice to speak.

"Makoto!"

Sayaka rushed to his side, shaking him and quick to check if he was alright. Seeing that he was still breathing, she allowed a sigh of relief, but she didn't leave his side.

Hina glared at Mondo. "What the hell is your problem?" she asked indignantly.

Before he could respond, Monokuma's laugh rang throughout the hall.

"Puhu! Puhuhuhuhuhuhuhuhu! How exciting! Look, if you bastards are really so resigned to spending the rest of your lives here, then why don't you just kill somebody?"

Hina stood defiantly before the small bear. "Forget it! Nobody here is killing anyone!"

I was impressed by her bravery, and her stubbornness.

Monokuma stopped laughing. "Is that so? Well, we'll see, won't we?" His red eye flashed dangerously once more. "Listen, as much as I'd love to stay and chat, assembly's nearly over! I've provided you all with special electronic ID cards just for you. On them you'll find all the rules and regulations, make sure to read them carefully. Breaking a school rule can lead to punishment. And punishment means the need for drastic measures to enforce school policy."

He raised his paw, unveiling three sharp claws.

"And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

He laughed once more, and with that, he jumped back behind the podium and was gone.

For a painfully long moment, there was nothing but silence.

At last, it was broken by Sayaka, her voice tremulous. "S-so what now?"

For a minute, no one said a word.

Then, "Isn't it obvious? We wait for someone to die." The answer, cold and matter-of-fact, came from none other than Byakuya Togami.

The chilling words sent a shiver up my spine.
"How can you say that?" Hina's anxious voice was loud in the fearful silence. Her expression was disgusted.

"It could happen. We cannot simply rule out the possibility, no matter how much we may wish to," stated Kyoko, rational and cool under pressure.

There was something impressive about how calm she remained about the whole thing, but also something eerie.

Chihiro sniffed. "This is awful, how are we ever going to escape this place?" she said, her voice cracking as if she were near the brink of tears.

Sayaka stood up, moving to comfort her. "Don't worry Chihiro, I'm sure the cops are out searching for us."

Byakuya scoffed. "You're seriously going to rely on the cops?"

"I-I'm sorry, I..." Chihiro stuttered.

"Hey, leave the kid alone!" Mondo snapped, his temper firing up again. "Want me to teach you a lesson?"

Byakuya rolled his eyes. "Yes, exercise more pointless violence. That's sure to be extremely productive."

"Mondo, relax. Chihiro is fine, and Byakuya is right. We don't need any more trouble."

For being a fairly small girl, Kyoko's presence commanded a lot of authority.

Byakuya turned away, heading towards the exit. "I've heard enough. You people are making my head hurt, it positively boggles the mind." He left without another word.

I could see that Mondo and Hina were seething.

Hina even moved to follow him, but Sakura put a warning hand on Hina's shoulder.

"Just let him be for now."

Hina grit her teeth in frustration, but relented nonetheless.

Leon piped up. In all the tension, I hadn't notice him grab his handbook. He raised a hand to make a point, clicking through the handbook and not looking up from the screen. "Uh, guys? I'm skimming through the rules, and what do you think number 5 means? 'If he is not betrayed by his classmates'?"

Celeste answered, also clicking through her e-handbook. "I should think that it means that the culprit cannot let anyone else find out about the murder." She answered so casually, it felt out of place associated with such a dark topic.

I snatched mine up, clicking through the rules to confirm it with my own eyes. Sure enough, it was there.

"Yeah but... They—whoever 'they' even is—don't seriously expect us to kill each other, right?" said Hina. "Surely nobody here is that desperate... right?"

"Even if it isn't meant to be serious, there could be someone stupid enough to believe it... and desperate enough to try." Celestia's words were harsh, but we all knew it was the uncomfortable
truth.

Silence.

I decided I would be the one first one to break it.

"Well then, what do you suppose we should do?"

Her response was unnaturally cheerful. "Why adapt of course!" She smiled. "I'm certain we can manage to live together without any issues, I do hate it when I predict misfortune." She sighed, her positive attitude shifting almost immediately to one of resignation.

Her moods could shift so quickly, it was impossible to keep up.

Hifumi sighed as well, his posture absolutely deflating, "I always felt that I was written into the wrong story." He was heartbreakingly sullen. "Now it turns out I've been plopped right into the setting right out of a murder mystery novel, but it is not nearly as exciting and adventurous as I had hoped."

Toko snapped. "B-Be quiet! This isn't one of your romance novels, this is--this--this is real." She clapped her hands over her ears, shaking her head, eyes closed, muttering to herself. "This isn't happening... This isn't happening... This isn't happening.. Wh-Why me..." Her breathing was getting rapid.

"Toko, there's no need to be like that," said Sayaka, moving once again away from Chihiro to comfort. "I realize that our situation may not be ideal, but arguing—"

She was cut off by more of Toko's shrill hysterics.

"N-No shit! I don't need an airhead l-l-li--like you p-p-pointing out the obvious. Ideal? Our situation is f-f-f-far--far from--far from ideal, i-it's despicable, it's heinous, it's c-crueler than cruel!"

Surprisingly, it was not Sayaka but Leon whose temper had been ignited like a fuse. He stepped in between them, coming to Sayaka's aid. "Hey, what's the idea? Say that to her again, I dare you."

"Enough."

Kyoko's voice, usually quiet, was heard loud and clear throughout the entire gym. It had a note of finality to it that heavily implied not to challenge her. "All this arguing is pointless."

"Right... So then what are we gonna do with 'Koto, here?" asked Hiro, nodding in the figure's direction. Makoto was still on the floor.

"Yeah, I mean we can't exactly just leave him laying here, can we?" said Junko from where she stood beside me, hands on her hips.

I thought it over.

"I think... the best thing for us to do would be to just have someone take him somewhere to rest. I'm assuming since this is Hopes Peak Academy, we more than likely have rooms."

"Yeah!" said Hina. "There's a whole row of dorms with nameplates! I passed 'em by not too long ago, on the way here!"

Sakura added, "Not to mention, Monokuma did say that we would be staying here for... quite some time. Surely there must be proper accommodations."
I nodded.

"I'll take him," said Mondo, raising a hand.

Perhaps I imagined it, but I could have sworn I detected a hint of embarrassment coupled with shame in his voice.

Kyoko shook her head. "You've done enough. I'll take him."

"I'll go with you," I said. It was almost reflexive, I didn't know what compelled me to accompany her. Maybe it had something to do with Kyoko. Maybe I was worried about Makoto.

She didn't speak, only nodding ever so slightly at me in acknowledgement.

Taka held up a hand as if to say "wait". "Hold on!"

We waited expectantly.

"Before you leave, I propose that we should all split up and search the building for a way out. Or at the very least for clues! Does everyone know where the cafeteria is?"

A couple people nodded.

"It's not hard to find," said Sakura.

"Yep!" said Hina. "It's right by the dorms. There's a sign, can't miss it."

"Perfect!" said Taka. "We should meet there in an hour." He checked his watch. "So at 9:30 we meet in the cafeteria to discuss our findings. Also I propose that we stay in groups. Just... Just to be on the safe side."

Everyone murmured in agreement. Even so, the statement left an ominous feeling in the air.

My eyes were met by Junko's. She put on a brave face, but I sensed that she was not as okay as she was letting on.

Our reunion had certainly been very different from what we had anticipated.

Chapter End Notes

Full list of tags, ships, triggers, I didn't want to clutter up the ao3 tags too much but I'm sure I failed:

Tags/Triggers/Ships! (Feel free to skip if you don't care! Or if you don't like spoilers!)

Characters:
- Protagonist: Mukuro
- Secondary-ish: Makoto, Sayaka, Kyoko, Junko Enoshima
- the rest of the 78th class (everyone is about as important as they are in the original text)
- Monokuma

Ships:
- 1st: Mukuro/Kyoko (endgame), Mukuro/Makoto, Mukuro/Sayaka (unrequited-ish, Mukuro->Sayaka), Mukuro/Being at least a little gay for all the girls
- 2nd: Mondo/Taka, Leon/Sayaka (platonic-ish/ambiguous), Hina/Sakura (one-sided in terms of romance, Hina->Sakura), Hiro & Mukuro (VERY platonic)
- Others: Minor Leon/Byakuya (unrequited possibly, Leon->Byakuya), implications of Makoto/Sayaka, Toko/Byakuya* (unrequited, Toko ->Byakuya), future Junko/Celeste if you squint, Mondo & Chihiro & Taka (platonic),

*Togafuka disclaimer: Sorry for people who like this ship, I find it to be a pretty unhealthy dynamic. I am tagging it so that people do know that Toko's feelings toward him does exist in-fic, but I'll just straight up admit right now that the relationship not condoned, nor is it hand-waved away & played purely for comedy.

Additional tags & triggers:
- Triggers: Much of the same triggers from the original game will probably show up here: major character death, graphic (but stylized) depictions of violence, possible future mentions of suicide, emotional abuse & manipulation
- Other tags: Despair Sisters, discussion of mental illness, Junko is reimagined, Mukuro is reimagined, future nonbinary characters, wlw, sapphic protagonist, queer protagonist, other LGBT characters
- (spoilers? Sapphic Mukuro, Sapphic Kyoko, Lesbian Hina, Gay Taka, Gay Byakuya, mlm Mondo, Bisexual Leon (GNC Leon if you squint), Genderqueer/nonbinary Chihiro, but lets be real most of the characters are gay as hell and if you read them that way its probably what I intended)
- ships are implied (mostly)*

*by implied i mean it's obvious that the characters are attracted to each other, so there's lots of good old romantic melodrama, but kind of in that repressed Jane Austen way where no one can admit it b/c it's just not the most appropriate setting for dating... so on a scale of Canon Dangan Ronpa to Nick Sparks Novel, the level of "romance" is around a Life is Strange level

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(If you're wondering about Hiro's shoe-rant, just look up Hannibal Chau's shoes from pacific rim. That's them.)

I want to make this somewhat interactive with my audience, so feedback is very important! You guys get to have input on who mukuro spends free time with, as well as any ships that you can feel are being implied, i will take into account your input on which direction I should go with them. Just a warning there will probably be some untagged ships because I want to keep you guys surprised. I will tag them once the ship is actually introduced into the story.

Also if I didn't go as much into detail about everything as they did in DR, its because I know you all read the original and know the basics, hope that doesn't bother anyone.

I'll be updating soon.

EDIT 2018: Apparently some people need this spelled out because they accused me, a wlw, of queerbaiting, but I started this fic in 2013 when I was in the closet and in denial. I have matured since then. Yes, the first few chapters are flawed, particularly when it comes to the relationship aspects of the fic, and her relationship to Makoto took priority, but I find it quite disingenuous to leave rude comments based on my writing from 2013
when its been 6 years since this fic was first posted. You can interpret Mukuro's attraction to Makoto as genuine or as comp-het, however you like, but the entire point of the Makoto vs. Kyoko tease is to mirror the fact that Makoto does in fact have TWO love interests in DR, Sayaka (a first love), and Kyoko (a true love). (And throw in Byakakuya and that makes three love interests... which... my fic kinda has, too, in Sayaka)

Kyoko/Mukuro is endgame. I wanted it to be a surprise, but I guess I have to spoil it now because people don't know how to be nice.

The funny thing is that the seeds of Kyoko/Mukuro ARE in the first few chapters from 2013, even if they are subtle, so it's not like Kyoko/Mukuro wasn't always an option in the back of my mind.

It's almost like.... fics are basically serialized.... and an authors relationship to their own work can change in the years they spend on it. And their view can change even more in the years they spent just letting it sit on hiatus before returning back to the work as a hopefully more mature adult.....

Sorry if that sounded bitter in any way, thank you so much for taking the time to read my work!
The walk to the dorms with Kyoko was a quiet one. I hadn't really expected anything else. Although I was fairly surprised that she was able to carry Makoto so easily—but admittedly also a little impressed. While he was a pretty small person, it was still a lot of weight; however, it seemed that she was able to carry him with hardly an issue at all.

The room was not hard to find. The dormitory hall was bright red, and each door was labelled with the name of a student as well as an accompanying picture for good measure. We found his room, no trouble. It had a sprite of Makoto on the door. Using his room key, we were able to enter the room with his name and lay him on the bed.

The room was red like the halls and sparse in decoration with plain-looking but otherwise adequate furnishings that included a matching wooden desk and drawers. On the desk was a notepad for writing. A small monitor was built into the wall and in the corner of the room was another camera. The room's most distinguishable feature was the fact that steel plates were bolted to the wall, just like the ones in the empty classroom.

A small noise of discomfort came from Makoto as he was laid on the bed. I checked his pulse. He seemed ok for the time being, but I decided that I should probably check on him before we assembled in the cafeteria, to make sure nothing was wrong. He needed to recover. If he wasn't awake by then, I could always inform him about the meeting's content later. At the moment, it was more important that he was safe.

"Thank you for accompanying me," said Kyoko.

I nodded in response. We stood in silence for a moment before I added, a thought coming to me, "Since we're already together... let's just stick together while we investigate, ok?"

While I preferred investigating alone, I wanted to comply with the agreement.

"Actually, I'd better be going now—"

I frowned. "Do you have some sort of private business to attend to?"

No response.

"The agreement was to stick together," I added, my tone a little harsher than I had intended.

That was the trouble with first impressions. Sure, she's piqued my interest—I mean, how could I not be entranced? But that didn’t mean we were quite ready for trust. I didn't know how I felt about the whole lone wolf act. Even I could be sociable on occasion.

"It's nothing... Forget about it."

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but she seemed on edge. But when I met her eyes, I saw none of that. She was back to her normal impassive demeanor.

"Actually, you know what? Have you seen the locked corridors? There's one right down the hall." To my surprise, she shifted her tone, somehow willing and cooperative.
I shook my head. "I didn't have the time. I was already late."

She nodded. "I'll show you."

Without a glance back, she walked out of the room, undoubtedly expecting me to follow behind.

I kept pace alongside her, despite the fact that her stride was surprisingly quick in her high-heeled boots.

It was silent except for the click of shoes against what was the same tile floor as in the other hallways. The (once again) dimly lit halls were not exactly inviting for the prospect of friendly conversation. More than anything, I was wary of wandering off. I was uneasy. The idea of being left alone with Kyoko was finally starting to hit me.

She lead me to the end of a short corridor. It was barred from access, but you could see right through the metal screen to the other side. However, there wasn't much to see. It just lead somewhere off-limits.

Perhaps I was getting my hopes up, but could it have been a way out?

"There's another area like this next to the gym, but it leads up the stairwell," said Kyoko. "Would you like to see that one as well?"

"I'll take your word for it." I peered through the cage. There was no indication of anything suspicious, but I still ached to know what was behind this barrier. "And there's no way past?" I turned to look at her. She shook her head. "Do you think either is a way out?"

She shook her head again, pulling out a folded piece of paper. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a map of the school. "As far as I can tell, the only exit is through the entrance hall." She pointed to where it was located on the map.

"Where did you get that?" I asked. I eyed her, partly curious, mostly suspicious.

I tried to read her. Nothing. She was blank, as usual.

As much as I'd come to respect her in such a short time, everything about her behavior indicated to me that I should trust her about as far as I could throw her.

Kyoko looked away. "It doesn't matter."

She didn't falter under my suspicious gaze, so after a moment I turned to scrutinize the map instead.

"You sure it's accurate?" I asked.

"As far as I know. It's been reliable thus far, and we don't really have anything else to go on."

I sighed in resignation. "Alright."

She pointed to another section on the map. "There are also rooms blocked off by caution tape. Judging from the map and what I saw, they're the infirmary and storage room."

We looked through the cage screen. There was an ominous feeling coming from the restricted area. "Something about this place..." my voice trailed off leaving my sentence unfinished, but she seemed to understand what I meant. I could tell.
We stood together in silence for a short while before Kirigiri murmured, "We still have a good thirty minutes left. We should put it to some use." She hurriedly crammed the map into the pocket of her uniform. "Would you accompany me a little while longer?"

I was intrigued.
"Lead the way."

--

Our destination this time was an empty classroom, similar to the room where I woke up.

"What are we doing here?" I asked, looking around the room.

"This is the classroom I woke up in. I assume you woke up in an empty classroom as well?"

"Yes..." I answered slowly. Where was she going with this?

"You are the Ultimate Detective, are you not, Mukuro?"

I straightened my posture, suddenly acutely aware of her piercing gaze on me, as she were analyzing my every move.

"I am."

I tried to say it with as much dignity as I could muster.

Her gaze lingered for a moment before she finally turned to pick up a paper sitting in on desk beside her and hold it out to me. "Tell me what you make of this." I took it gingerly from her, flipping through what I now realized was a pamphlet and examined it carefully. "This looks... nearly identical to the one I received. Handwriting is messy, writer was either hasty or unsteady, perhaps they just didn't care? Looks like it may be the latter, although I don't know what to make of that..." I looked up at her at her for any sign of a response or a reaction. When I didn't get one, I took this a queue to continue. "This handwriting looks familiar to me although I can't quite place it." This time there was a reaction, if ever so slightly. Her eyes widened in what could only be surprise. I pretended to continue examining the pamphlet, but I could see the new look of suspicion in her her eyes.

"You don't recognize this handwriting, do you?" I asked.

She shook her head.


"And the metal plates, what do you think of them?"

I approached the metal-plated walls, cautiously removing my glove and running my fingers along the smooth metal as I examined it. I could feel the coolness of the steel even through my gloves. The bolts were large and fastened very tight. "Steel, most likely they'd be impossible to remove manually. Fairly new. Based on the strategic placing of the plates in each of the rooms, I'm guessing their function is most likely to block off access to windows, for obvious reasons." I felt comfortable, in my element. I moved on, examining the rest of the room as well. "At least one camera in every room, judging by what we've seen. No mobility. Can't know for sure, but I think we should proceed on the assumption they also include some sort of microphone system."
Kyoko remained silent.

Curious to what was going on in her head, I turned to face her. "Kyoko?"

She looked deep in thought. My question broke through her reverie, and she blinked, looked up at me. "Yes?"

I hesitated to voice my question, but I went ahead with it. "You don't seem like the type of person that's keen on relying on other people for help. Why are you asking for mine?"

I waited for an answer, but there was none.

At last she shrugged and said, "You are the Ultimate Detective. Your input on our predicament is valuable to me." I said nothing. "My own pride is of little importance when it comes to survival. It is in my—and I am assuming everyone else's as well—best interest to make sure that we are as prepared as possible to face our current situation."

"But you still don't trust me."

It was a statement, not a question.

"I don't trust most people. Comes with the job. Let's just say I prefer to work alone."

She stopped, but I noticed a hesitancy in her voice.

"But?" I asked.

"But... I still need your help. As far as trust is concerned... There has not been enough time for me to make a proper decision."

She did not meet my eyes.

"So that's a 'no' then."

"I never said that," she snapped, her response much too quick, her gaze averted. She was typically so much more difficult for me to read than people usually were, but even the best sometimes faltered.

I smirked. I really don't know why I felt the need to press the matter, the last thing I needed was a super soldier as an enemy. But I did. "It was implied. And you're reaction just confirmed my suspicions." I resisted the strong temptation to wink.

I glanced over at the clock, which read 9:25.

"It's nearly time for the meeting. I'm going to go check on Makoto." I hesitated."I think you should show everyone that map. Although I don't know what you're going to tell them about where you got it, since you wouldn't even tell me." On that note, I left the room.

I quickly made my way down the dim corridors and over to the dorms. Since we had left his key in his room, I had no choice but to just ring and hope he hadn't left already. I was reaching my hand out for the buzzer when...

The door swung wide open, connecting right with my head. There was a loud smack right as I felt a sharp pain shoot across my forehead. I lost my balance, falling over and hitting the ground with another loud thump.

"Mukuro!"
I heard Makoto's panicked voice through the haze of pain, my ears ringing. I looked up, seeing a very apologetic Makoto Naegi hovering over me, eyes wide and anxious.

I grimaced, rubbing my forehead in an attempt ease the pain. "Aren't you supposed to make sure the hallways are a safe environment?"

"I'm so, so sorry Mukuro," said Makoto, offering his hand to me. I took it, and he helped me to my feet. "Are you alright?"

"I'm ok, don't worry."

"Are you sure?" he asked, hands wringing as he looked at me in earnest.

I tried to lighten up. "Better a door than a fist, right?"

He didn't laugh, but continued to look at me with a guilty expression.

"I'll be fine, Makoto," I tried my best to reassure him. "The more important question is are you alright, since, well... That's the reason I came to check on you."

"Y-you came to check on me?"

I nodded. "Yeah... To see how you were doing. Mondo hit you pretty hard."

"Oh! Well I'm doing much better now. Thank you, Mukuro. Although my head still hurts a little." He grinned sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head.

"Well, at least you're ok. Actually, while you were out the rest of us took it upon ourselves to search the school. We're supposed to be meeting in the cafeteria right about now."

"Oh, I guess we'd better go straight away then. Thank you for letting me know, Mukuro."

"O'course. It's important we all show up."

It was a short walk to the cafeteria. Everyone was already gathered inside. It seemed that most of the students were making small talk, but the eyes of everyone were on us as we entered the room.

"There she is!" Junko exclaimed upon seeing me. "Thank god. It's about time, we were just about to start without you guys."

"Well, thank you for waiting for us," I said gratefully.

"Mukuro, it is 10:07. I would've expected better punctuality from the pair of you," said Taka, giving us a disapproving look. He tapped his watch.

"My apologies for being late, but it can hardly be helped when Makoto was unconscious," I answered, maintaining my patience.

"It's ok, Makoto! We're just glad that you're alright."

Sayaka smiled her white, even smile reassuringly at him.

"Thank you, Sayaka."

He was blushing slightly, the way one does when greeted by a girl as pretty as Sayaka.
Mondo shuffled awkwardly, avoiding looking at him. "Yeah, uh... Sorry about that earlier, kid. I got carried away," he said, voice gruff and low.

"Apology accepted, Mondo. Really, it's fine."

Even after being punched so hard that he was knocked out, he still managed to put on his most winning smile. No hard feelings, no indication of any grudge. It was impressive.

"Can we get this meeting started already? Unless you plan on wasting this time with more pointless chatter." It was Byakuya, of course. "The sooner we start the sooner it can end."

Hina frowned. "Hey, it's not really necessary to be like that, ok?"

"Indeed," said Sakura, quick to to Hina's aid. "Hina is correct."

At this, Hina beamed up at her in response.

Sakura continued, paying her no mind. "This open hostility is hardly necessary. Rather, it's best to work past misunderstandings in order to truly communicate."

"I'd actually like to start the meeting as well."

Kyoko finally spoke up. She was such a quiet presence. I hadn't even noticed that she was in the room.

"Why don't you go first?" I said. I was egging her on, just a little, testing her.

"I don't think that's necessary."

"Sure it is. Tell them about the map you showed me."

"Map? What map?" Byakuya inquired suspiciously. His eyes narrowed behind his lenses.

Kyoko pulled out the map from her jacket pocket, glaring at me momentarily, which I pretended to ignore. Still scowling at me, she threw it unceremoniously on the large table in the middle of the room.

Makoto reached out, taking it in his hands and examining it over. "Where did you get this, Kyoko?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"Kyoko?"

He looked up at her, almost wounded by her lack of response.

"Don't avoid the question," said Byakuya, his annoyance apparent.

Junko rolled her eyes. "Oh, let her be. I mean, does it really matter where she got it?"

"She's right, I mean isn't it just good to have something that's of use?" asked Hina, expression anxious as her eyes darted back and forth between Junko and Byakuya.

I refrained from saying anything, but I could already tell that those two were going to get along just peachy.
"No matter how useful it may be, if we don't know where it came from then it's suspicious," countered Byakuya.

I decided to chip in my own two cents, siding with Junko on this one. "Even so, I don't see a point in fretting over it. It's just a map." Even if she hadn't been my sister, I figured we might as well just let it go. Then perhaps Kyoko could rest a little easier.

I felt that it was necessary to defend it, since I was pretty much responsible for getting Kyoko caught in everyone's crosshairs.

Hiro laughed. "'Right! Well-said, Mukuro! No harm, no foul."

Hifumi held up a timid hand. "Uhhhh... Mister Makoto Naegi, now that we've got that issue sorted, would it be out of the question to reveal the results of our exploration?" He adjusted his glasses.

"What? Oh! Yes, of course!" said Makoto. "As long as Kyoko has concluded with her findings."

She nodded.

"Alright, perfect! Then would anyone else like to go?"

"I will!" Junko announced, raising a hand enthusiastically and waving it around. "Chihiro and I looked through the dorms together!"

"There's one designated specifically for every one of us. And they're soundproof as well," said Chihiro quietly, continuing off Junko's train of thought.

"Yup! Chihiro and I tested it out ourselves," said Junko, grinning broadly.

An image flashed by in my mind of Junko and Chihiro banging loudly on the dorm walls and yelling their heads off before I quickly suppressed it.

Chihiro looked as if she were in thought. "And... I believe that's all."

"Thank you, Junko and Chihiro," said Taka. "As for myself, I was with Mondo and Hiro, and we came across the dry-cleaning room."

"It took th-th-three people t-t-to--to find the washroom?" muttered Toko, sounding skeptical, but she was ignored.

"There's several washing machines and dryers, so we don't have to worry about laundry," said Hiro, sounding pleased.

Junko snickered. "Lucky for you, right, because you wear like twelve layers of clothing."

"Junko!" I chastised her in hushed whispers.

Thankfully, Hiro either was blissfully unaware of what she had said, or he just didn't care.

Sakura spoke up. "Hina, Hifumi, and I went to the entrance hall. There we found that the front entrance was blocked by a huge iron door."

Hina added, "Sakura tried her best to bust down the door, but even she couldn't do it!"

Sakura nodded. "I gave it my best effort, but it would not budge."
"'Course, Sakura!" said Hina with an encouraging nod. "No one's doubting that."

Hifumi sighed. "It appears as though we are truly stuck in this horrid asylum of a school."

Celeste spoke. "Well, naturally if the mastermind behind the whole ordeal wants to keep us here, simply busting down the door isn't going to happen, even with some of the strongest people in Japan in our company."

It was a bit of a somber thought, so I tried to conclude it on more positive note. "Although I commend you for trying, Sakura."

She nodded in thanks.

Celeste smiled. "Well, this isn't too bad! We have comfortable living quarters and the kitchen looks well stocked. We should be thankful for what we have instead of worrying about what we cannot change."

"Even with so much food, it will still eventually run out," said Hifumi mournfully.

"If we do th-then you can eat birdseeds," Toko hissed scathingly.

He was indignant. "Excuse me? Am I a man or a parakeet? A genius such as myself who is still yet to be recognized should be well nourished!"

Toko grumbled under her breath, "B-B-B-rate smut author."

"Glorified plagiarist."

"I've read doujinshi that give women better depth."

"Your vocabulary is so stunted a third grader can do better."

"Unrealistic and indulgent."

"Cliché and predictable."

Junko stepped in between them, holding out her hands as if to say "stop".

"Girls, girls, you're both pretty." She cut in then, stopping the argument before it could escalate any further, although judging by her expression, she seemed to be enjoying herself tremendously.

"Besides, you guys," said Sayaka, still looking anxious over what had just taken place. "We don't have to worry. The kitchen is restocked every day! Monokuma told us."

"You saw him?" asked Chihiro in surprise.

"Yup." Leon grimaced. "Popped up outta nowhere and disappeared just as quickly to who knows where."

Mondo clenched his fists, jaw set in anger. "Next time I see that bear, he's gonna get what's coming to him."

"Pardon me, but I would like to bring to your attention that it says in the rules that violence against the 'headmaster' is forbidden."

It was Celeste. Her pleasant formality, no matter what the subject, was unmistakable.
"Personally I'm curious to see what the punishment is for breaking one of the rules. What with our unique form of 'graduation', I'm sure it's nothing pleasant."

She giggled, and I shivered as I felt a chill go up my spine.

For a moment, he seemed to be stunned speechless. At last, he hung his head, embarrassed. "I ain't dying. I mean I'd love to beat the crap out of that monochrome little shit, but... I made a promise to my big brother a while back."

"Wh-What does that have to do with--with anything?" cried Toko hysterically.

"Yeah, Mondo, what gives?" asked Junko.

He glared. "It means I have promises that I still intend to keep. So there's no way in hell I'm dying."

Celestia's smile never faltered. "So then I'm presuming we'll have your cooperation when it comes to compliance with the rules?"

He nodded, his calm demeanor was strange compared to his chaotic rage.

"Now that we've come to the conclusion they punching our way through all of our problems is obviously not the way to go, are we quite done already?" said Byakuya.

"Says the computer geek who can't hold a conversation to save his life," deadpanned Junko. "Hey, are those headphones around your neck? Tell me, Byakuya, what exactly are they hooked up to? Because my phone's gone, so you may just want to check your pockets. I don't think there could be anything sadder than just wearing them for the aesthetic."

She smirked at him while everyone, at hearing those words, began rummaging around frantically for their own devices. There were several cries of shock when the others realized that, yes, their electronics were indeed missing.

I checked my own pockets as well and found them to be empty just like with everyone else.

Byakuya's expression did not change, but I could have sworn that he went slightly ashen as Junko's statement. Junko, obviously still not satisfied, continued. "Anyways, what's the rush? Why so eager to leave? Don't tell me you've got some prior commitment. 'Cause even disregarding the fact that we're stuck in this mess, I find that pretty hard to believe. Unless it's some sort of 'keyboarders anonymous' support group."

Byakuya didn't go completely red, but the pink tinge on his pale skin was enough to convey his embarrassment. He said nothing.

"Actually, Junko does have a point. We aren't finished. Toko, Celeste, what have the two of you been doing all hour?"

I was surprised to hear Kyoko's voice again after she had spent so long in silence.

"Actually, we stayed in the gymnasium the entire time." Celeste looked considerably less cheerful than she had been previously.

"Huh? You seriously stayed there the entire time?" asked Junko, incredulous.

"Well, n-n-nobody asked me if--if I w-wanted--wanted to-t-o-to g-g-go with them!" It took her ages to get the sentence out. Toko seemed to be getting herself worked up, her stuttering getting even
worse.

"Toko, you could have just asked someone yourself if you wanted to come along," said Hina, trying to appeal to reason.

Toko just shook her head, muttering something to herself.

Celeste sighed. "To be perfectly honest, the whole 'exploring' thing is not exactly my cup of tea."

"Very well." Kyoko shifted her gaze over to where Byakuya was standing. "And you, Byakuya?"

Byakuya, who by this time seemed to have recovered from Junko's mockery, answered, "I found nothing." He seemed completely apathetic, perhaps feeling shut down after Junko's remarks.

"Nothing?" Her piercing eyes were fixated on him, one eyebrow raised questioningly, but he kept his eyes averted.

"If I had found anything worth reporting, I would have said something earlier." His irritation was apparent in his voice.

She nodded and shrugged. Perhaps it was my imagination, but for a moment I thought I recognized the barest traces of a smile cross her lips. And then I blinked, and it was gone as if it had never existed.

The loud ringing of a school bell echoed throughout the room. "Ahem." I heard a familiar voice. Looking around to find the source, I saw that the monitor on the wall was now on and displaying on the screen was Monokuma.

"Attention. It is 10 P.M. Night Time is now in effect. The dining hall will be closing momentarily. Sweet dreams, everyone!"

And with that, the screen went blank.

The room was quiet.

The first person to speak up was Kyoko.

"Seem's like it's about time we wrap this up."

"Oh! Uh, yes," said Makoto. "Does anyone else have anything else they would like to add before we do?"

"One last thing." It was Celeste. "The announcement has brought this issue to my attention. I would like to propose something."

"O..kay?" asked Makoto. "What is it, Celeste?"

"I would like to propose a rule for Night Time. It it not in the handbook, I think we should establish it now. Nobody leaves their dorms during those hours. Personally I'd like to be able to sleep without having to worry what might happen."

"It's... a good idea, but unfortunately we have no way to really enforce it," said Makoto thoughtfully. "But if everyone is ok with it, I think we should give it a try."

The group murmured in agreement.
"Very well," said Celeste. "It's just that... I have this premonition that the first murder will be during the Night Time, and I'd like to avoid that as much as possible." Her somber attitude felt strange in opposition to her usual eerie cheerfulness.

"Don't worry Celeste, I'm sure nothing of the sort will happen!"

Celeste ignored Sayaka's efforts to cheer her up.

She sighed, sounding absolutely forlorn. "We'll see."

And on that ominous note, the meeting concluded and the sixteen of us parted ways.

Chapter End Notes

It's not as long as the last chapter was, fortunately... or maybe unfortunately.

Also chapters will be divided into parts, most likely parts of 5. Part 1 will be introduction to setting or new environments, etc. Part 2 is a free time chapter, but since I've already started this one for chapter 1, you guys can suggest for next chapter instead, sorry. Part 3 is when the motive is given & the drama rises, part 4 is the murder and investigation, and part 5 is the trial.

Hope you enjoyed, and thanks for reading!
Chapter 1.2: Hey, Can We Go Gift Shopping?

Chapter Summary

ch [1.2] is often gonna be a Free-Time chapter.

Chapter Notes

Mukuro is FUTC

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So tell me about yourself!" Junko prompted me over breakfast.

We were sitting together in the cafeteria with our would-be classmates. The 16 of us occupied the one long table, and we all were trying our best to make awkward idle chatter.

It was all Makoto’s idea. The boy had woken up early just to go to each individual's dorm, wake them, greet them good morning, and invite them to breakfast. Personally, Makoto Naegi—or, well, anyone—seeing me in my early morning state was not exactly my idea of a good morning; however, he was insistent that I come down to breakfast with everyone else.

("Surely you must, Mukuro!").

Despite my futile attempts at refusal, I could hardly say no to the kid. Just that smile was enough to win me over.

Junko's voice woke me from my reverie and drowsiness. I wasn't particularly a morning person. Upon finally registering her question, I shrugged nonchalantly. "What's to tell? I'm sure compared to you, my life isn't nearly as exciting."

I was feeling a little strange this morning, even from the beginning. Examining myself in the mirror after waking up, I was sure that something was different, even in my state of grogginess.

(Or maybe I was just getting uglier).

"Don't be ridiculous! You're a detective, how is that not exciting? Besides..." She waved her hand carelessly. "My life is already splashed across the tabloids."

I said nothing, keeping my eyes down, fixed on my plate.

"Come on!" she whined, hopping up and down in her chair excitedly. The chair rattled, and I feared any moment it would topple.

"What've you been up to for the past who-knows-how-many years? Dad almost never talks about you. Or Mom." Her voice was suddenly much quieter, "When she ran off to solve mysteries, taking my only sister with her, I thought I'd never see you again, ya know?"
Maybe she had lost track, but I knew that "who-knows-how-many-years" was equivalent to almost 12 years. Not that I had kept track for any particular reason. Mom never liked to talk about Dad. Or about my sister, who I vaguely knew existed but knew next to nothing about, save for the fainter than faint memories.

They were like phantoms; their only proof of existence were a couple of old crappy photos.

So I stopped asking. It was like that elephant in the room. That thing that you pretend isn't there even though you know that obviously it is.

"To be fair," I said to her, "I didn't think my baby sister would grow up to be so famous."

Junko was so different from the child in the photos, the ever present companion at my side who I knew nothing about.

She had this whole exciting, glamorous life, separate from mine.

12 years is a long time.

I smiled, deciding at last to oblige her with answers. Despite the fact that they were hardly answers at all. "If you really want to know, my last case was in Europe. Actually," I said, the memories—for some reason much cloudier than they probably should be—flooding back to me. "Mom wasn't with me that time. I was in... oh, what was it? It was one of those small countries... Novoselic?"

Despite my non-answers, she hung onto every word.

"And Mom? What's she like?" she asked eagerly, eyes wide with interest.

I thought about it for a moment.

"Quiet," I finally decided. "Really quiet."

She laughed, despite the lack of joke. I joined in as well, her laughter infectious. It was a strange feeling.

"Fair enough," she said, still laughing. Finally she was able to compose herself. "Dad's the opposite. He's loud, and he talks way too much. He was the one who really pushed me to come here." For a moment, she looked sad. Then the moment passed, and she was back to her usual self. "Well, I suppose he had to do something with his life since the 'family business' didn't appeal to him."

By that, she meant detective work. I didn't know the details of the ordeal, but apparently the split was so sordid and painful that both parties agreed never to speak of it. I knew almost nothing about my father, nor about the history of our family. I just knew that detective work was a family tradition.

I nodded, not taking my eyes off my half-eaten piece of toast.

She continued, "The stage name was his idea, too." She paused. "You know... as much as it royally sucks that we're stuck here like this, I'm really glad I got to see you again."

I looked back up at her, surprised at how sincere she seemed. "So am I."

"Let's get out of this place together. You and I. We're gonna get out of that awful place." Her eyes were bright and full of hope. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to protect her, to shelter her from the awful world.

I nodded. Trying to lighten up from the somber turn the conversation had taken, I said, "The
company could take some getting used to, but they're not all that bad." When she didn't answer, I added, "This is some pretty heavy stuff, and I'm not talking about the breakfast."

She snorted.

I yawned, trying not to think about the fact that I would probably still be asleep under normal circumstances. How I missed my usual bed--the one at home--despite the fact that the mattress creaked and the pillows were shedding feathers and much too soft.

But it was a bed, and it was mine, not this strangers bed I'd been forced to occupy.

"Are you alright, Mukuro?" asked Sayaka.

Perhaps she'd taken notice of my expression, whatever that was, because she sounded concerned.

She sat across from me, right beside Junko. I'd been so preoccupied with my sister that I'd hardly noticed her. Although just that idea was laughable. She was such a head-turner, it was hard to miss her.

"Oh, I'm fine, just tired is all," I tried to reassure her.

She nodded. "I'm a little tired myself," she said.

If she was, she didn't look it. There was no indication that she was anything but picture perfect, in contrast to my own hooded eyelids and purplish shadows making my face look sunken. I didn't think of myself as a superficial person, but how I envied her looks.

I wished I was a morning person. It'd certainly make my job easier. Black coffee was dubbed in our household as "jet fuel," due to its hideous color and necessity just to get through working cases during early hours. Which, admittedly, weren't often. Being a detective wasn't exactly a 9-to-5 thing. It was just something I did because my mother was doing it, and I always followed my mother. She always voiced her hopes of me taking over the family business. I always just figured that I would since I had no other choice really to entertain. These were my only skills. I never really thought about it. I guess I just assumed it was inevitable. It was the only future I could imagine for myself.

Although the black coffee was probably something I could stand to live without.

(I was definitely not one of those people who craved the authentic flavor. I used creamer because I, unlike others, did not hate myself.)

"Did you often have early morning cases?" asked Sayaka curiously, interrupting my mood swings.

"Every once in a while. That's sort of not how it works, but we have to be ready for a case at any time. So really, any at all is more often than I would like."

I was intrigued. How did she know?

"But how did you—"

"Know? I can read minds," she said, with what appeared to be complete seriousness.

I raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

Somber composure broken, she giggled, the whole thing clearly an act. "Kidding! I just have really good intuition."
Now I wasn't a people person by any means, but I considered myself to be a person with good intuitions. It just came with my area of expertise—more from experience than anything else. In terms of social interaction, the "reading people" part was the easy part. The talking to them was where it tripped me up. I just wasn't built for social graces.

But this... this was a whole new level of "good intuition." Undoubtedly, there was more to Sayaka Maizono than I had initially presumed, and it was absolutely fascinating. She was more than just a pretty face.

She was wearing a yellow bow in her hair, as opposed to the pink one she had been wearing the previous day. Once again, she was impeccably dressed and absolutely pristine.

If I was being honest with myself, she was even prettier in person than she was in the magazines.

However, I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about her seemed different.

Catching on to my weird and unabashed gazing, Sayaka shot me a look.

"Mukuro, why are you staring? I know I don't quite live up to the cover shots, but those things are photoshopped," she said, once again as if she were in tune to my thoughts.

I flushed red with embarrassment, looking away from her and back down at my breakfast plate. I didn't speak for the rest of the meal.

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"'Kuro, I'm bored," Junko complained.

The two of us were killing time in her room. With no school (and the imminent possibility of murder), there wasn't much regarding ways to occupy ourselves. When we'd got back from breakfast, she immediately had flopped onto her bed and hadn't moved since. Meanwhile I was standing in front of her bathroom mirror, in sheer awe at the amount of cosmetics she had lined across her bathroom counter. She probably had enough to run a beauty parlor.

"'Kuro'?” I asked, unsure of what to make of the word. I turned to look at her to see that she was sprawled comically across her unmade bed, her head and her arms dangling over the side, her pigtails so long that they touched the floor.

She slid herself down to the floor. "Yeah, 'Kuro. It's ok if I call you 'Kuro, right?"

I answered automatically. "Yeah, that's..." I let my sentence trail as I turned to look away from her and back at my own reflection. "That's fine."

I'd never had a nickname before. The idea made me feel oddly happy. I smiled to myself.

From her spot on the floor, I heard Junko call out, "I have a beyond brilliant idea!" In my surprise, I turned to look at her to see that I was mistaken. Rather than laying on the floor, she had popped up off the ground like a daisy. "Ok, hear me out. I think, you are in need of a makeover!"

"What?" I asked, not quite sure exactly what I was hearing. I tried to refuse. "No, no... You don't have to..."

She ignored my protests.

Not that I hated makeup, but in my mind it was always a little bit like wizardry. It was ritualistic, you
can transform into someone totally different, it was impossible to learn. There was something just mysterious about it. I'd given up on the idea long ago. There was no fixing these dark circles.

"Yeah!" She was beside me in an instant, holding my hands in hers. "Please, please, please, 'Kuro!"

How could I possibly say no?

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"Stop fidgeting. You're messing me up."

"I'm sorry, I've never really done this before."

"You're kidding right?" asked Junko.

I shrugged. "I've always dedicated my time to my cases."

"You're moving," she complained. "Close your eyes." I shut my eyes. "No, not like that. Relax." I relaxed, only just realizing that I had been so tense that they were jammed shut.

I felt something swipe across my eyelids. As the process went on, I resisted the urge to pull away from the pencils and brushes that were poking at my face. Every once in a while, Junko would swear quietly under her breath. It made me a little nervous.

"Can I open my eyes?"

My nose was beginning to itch.

"No," said Junko firmly. "The liner still has to dry. Now don't move. I don't want to mess up your eyebrows."

"Mess up my wha—Ow!" I felt a tug and a sharp pain as a hair at the bottom of my eyebrow was removed.

"Shhhhh, don't talk, or they'll end up crooked," she said, continuing to tweeze away at my eyebrows.

I tried my best to hold still, but every now and then I would wince from the pain. At last, she stopped.

"Can I open my eyes now?" I asked.

"Yeah, go ahead."

I opened my eyes to see Junko standing before me, brandishing a small metal tool in her hand. I jumped back in fright.

She rolled her eyes. "Calm down. It's just an eyelash curler."

"A what?"


I shied away from her hand. "You're lying, there is no way that that thing is not some sort of weapon."

She laughed. "You're a riot, 'Kuro, really." Stern once again, she added, "Now seriously, don't
I protested weakly as I felt the little metal curler on my eyelashes. "What does this even do?"

"It's called an eyelash curler. What do you think it does? Other eye now."

I sat patiently until Junko had finished with the eyelash curler and applied mascara, the stickiness making it awful tempting to blink or wipe the mess away, but I resisted.

"You actually have nice eyelashes," she said.

"Thanks, I guess?"

"Mhm." She then applied something rosy my cheeks. It might've been blush?

"That tickles." I wrinkled my nose.

"I'm nearly finished." She took a step back, looking me up and down. "Alright... Well, there's not much we can do about your hair." She seemed to be talking more to herself than to me. "Maybe if I had a wig I could, but..."

"Wig?" I asked, perplexed. She had wigs in her room, too?

She shook her head. "Never mind, forget I said anything." She brushed my hair behind my ears with her finger, using a clip to keep it in place.

She took out the plain earrings I was wearing. "Thank god you have pierced ears because that could have gone horribly wrong," she said, substituting them with another pair.

"You've pierced ears before?" I asked dubiously, secretly grateful as well at having avoided that prospect.

"Nope!" she said, sounding oddly chipper about it. "Which is why I said it's a good thing yours are already pierced."

From what I could tell, she was implying that she would have pierced them herself. Not that I would ever let an inexperienced teen who I had just met yesterday come anywhere close to my ears with a sharp object, but I said nothing.

"Can I see now?" I asked.

"Alright," she trilled gleefully, smiling wide for me. "Turn around."

I turned to look at myself in the mirror and was completely taken aback by my own appearance.

Admittedly, she had done quite a good job, but it was just strange. Flaws that I didn't really even register that I had were now played down. Just my eyes looked a little brighter, my cheeks a little rosier, my hair framed my face a little better. It wasn't dramatic. Except maybe the eye makeup. I was pretty sure it was what could be called a "smokey eye". But I wasn't transformed.

It didn't feel fake, not exactly. It was still unmistakably me, just... a little more polished, maybe? Mixed emotions I didn't even know could go together were bubbling to the surface. I suddenly felt very self-conscious about things I'd never noticed before. But I just looked so... well, almost pretty.

"I tried to bring out your eyes. You have such nice eyes." I could see her watching me apprehensively for a reaction or response.
"My freckles..." I didn't look at her. I was transfixed by my own appearance, something that had never happened before in my life.

"I didn't want to cover them up. You should show them off!"

I nodded, still not looking at her.

"Oh... You don't like it," she said, sounding disheartened.

I shook my head.

"So you do like it?"

I nodded.

"Really?"

At last, I turned to look at her. She was grinning ear to ear. "Yes, er... Junko. You did a really good job, thank you," I told her with full sincerity.

There was an ecstatic squeal, and before I knew it, her arms were around me. Although this time, she let go almost immediately.

"Sorry, I'm a hugger." She grinned apologetically. "And enough with this overly formal crap. You're my sister, act like it! Call me sis. Or like... just give me a kickass nickname or something."

I gave a small chuckle before turning to look at myself in the mirror again. Call it shallow, but opportunities to allow myself a little vanity were few and far between.

"Hon, you've never looked better." She looked up and down approvingly, as if admiring her own work. "Eyebrow game so strong they can bench press more than Mondo Owada."

I suppressed the urge to laugh.

Something in the mirror caught my eye. I leaned in closer to my reflection, aiming to get a better look at my ears. Upon closer inspection, I was able to discern the shapes of my earrings.

"They're rabbits," I said, surprised.

"Yeah. Cute, huh?" said Junko. "Just think of them as a gift from me to you."

"You don't have to—"

"Don't be ridiculous," she cut me off. "It's nothing really."

"Alright, alright, sis. Thank you." I figured this was probably not an argument I would have won anyways.

She was elated. At that very moment, I was sure that nothing would have been able to crush her spirits. She gasped. "We have to show everyone!"

Oh, God.

I shook my head fervently, eyes wide.

"Come on," she begged. "My masterpiece simply can't go to waste!"
I sat down on the edge of her bed. "I just like staying here with you," I said, trying to pacify her.

Truthfully, I really didn't care if anyone else saw me. I felt good, and Junko was happy, and really that was what mattered, right? I'd never been one for attention or praise.

She pouted. "But I want everyone to see how great my big sister looks."

I sighed.

"You'll knock 'em dead for sure," she said. "Who knows, maybe even literally. Although when Monokuma said 'School of Mutual Killing', I don't think that's really what he had in mind."

"Jun—Uh, sis, do you really think that's an appropriate joke?" I asked, trying my best to conceal my exasperation.

She ignored the question, but instead took me by the hand and lead me out the door. "You know, I have a funny feeling I'm going to be getting that tone a lot from you."

---

"You look so pretty! You could be a model!"

"Thank you, Sayaka."

"Isn't she though? My biggest success to date."

"Junko, please, I'm right here."

"Mukuro is looking so good, yeah?"

"Seriously guys, I'm standing right here."

"Classic case of 'Beautiful All Along.' If you were fictional you'd be quite something, Miss Mukuro Ikusaba."

"..."

It was perhaps the most awkward situation I'd ever been forced to endure. And in all the years of my life I'd encountered some pretty awkward scenarios. I attributed it to the fact that I was probably just not used to fourteen nearly complete strangers giving me compliments. Ok, so all fourteen weren't present in the cafeteria, where Junko decided to go to show of her little "project." That was how she had referred to me. Her "project".

She was shameless in her attempts to show me off. I tried my best to be as gracious as possible to everyone who complimented me, despite being rather uncomfortable.

For just a brief point, I caught Kyoko staring at me. I thought she too was going to say something to me, but she stayed silent. She diverted her gaze as soon as our eyes met, and she turned away from me.

"You look really nice, Mukuro."

"Thank you, Makoto."

"I mean, not that you don't always look nice!" he corrected himself. "Because you do! You just look pretty all fixed up. Not that you need fixing by any means. I mean..."
You’d think the leader of the morals committee would be a little better at articulating what they wanted to say, rather than be a stammering mess. But that was awfully sweet.

I laughed, doing my best to conceal it behind my hand, as if that would do any good. Perhaps I was hoping it would spare him a least a little from embarrassment. My cheeks burned slightly, and I was hoping it would be disguised by the all blush Junko had applied. I was praying that nobody would notice. However, Junko must have because as soon as Makoto had left she was immediately beside me.

"I saw that," she said quietly so that only I could hear, with a smirk on her face that was making me uncomfortable.

"Saw what?" I asked.

"You know, that."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about Makoto," she said in a voice that implied that it should be completely obvious. "I'm totally calling this one. I'm doing it early. Otherwise, I won't get to say 'I told you so', and where's the fun in that?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know how. What even was the proper response to that sort of thing? 

---

It wasn't quite as bad waking up early the next day.

Still bad, but not quite as bad as before. I probably should have expected something like this would happen. Makoto had even said the previous morning that he wanted to turn breakfast with the group into an every day thing, but it didn't make me any less tired. I supposed it was just something I'd have to get used to.

That is, if I was correct in assuming Monokuma's "good morning" announcement on the monitors would be something we would have the pleasure of waking up to every single morning. I was a light sleeper, the kind that woke easily.

I had looked pretty ghastly waking up that morning, even more so than usual. I caught myself daydreaming of thoughts of concealer, but that was a joke. Even if I could get some (maybe from Junko), I had no idea how applying it actually worked. I never really thought there would be a day I'd actually wish for makeup, but perhaps it was my sister's influence. Still, most of it made me feel way out of my depths. Eyeshadow, bronzer, fake eyelashes? Forget about it. And I was not making the mistake of letting an "eyelash curler" near my face again. But concealer? That was more my speed.

All the same, it was a false hope at best. I had no idea how people managed to do the whole "makeup" thing every day. It was actually kind of impressive. I had neither the patience nor the skill for such a task.

While I was glad to make her happy, the whole experience had opened up a new floodgate of weird nitpicky qualms I had with my own appearance that had never really bothered me before.

Still, wanting to at least maintain a kept appearance, I brushed my hair, pinning it back under my bangs as usual. Looking myself in the mirror, I frowned. I was so pale. Maybe it was silly, but I pinched my cheeks, hoping that would give them some color.
And I made sure to wear my new earrings, of course.

At breakfast, some of the others had inquired as to why I wasn't all made up like yesterday, most with this tone of innocent curiosity that wasn't really convincing. It didn't really bother me. They meant well enough.

I was sitting at a table with Leon, Sayaka, and Junko. Junko was preoccupied with conversation with Sayaka, so Leon probably took this as a sign to at least attempt at casual conversation with me. I assumed his motives were simply for the purpose of politeness since the other two girls were distracted, and I was silent as I ate my breakfast.

"So what's your deal?" he asked me.

I nearly choked on my breakfast. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, are you like one of silent types who keeps to themselves most of the time? You're all mysterious and crap because you like to keep people guessing?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Is that a yes?"

He withered under the look I gave him.

"Alright, alright, never mind," he said. "That was a bad question. Let me try again... What sort of music do you like?"

I was taken aback by the sudden change of topic. "What? I... Uh... I'm... not sure really. I don't really have a specific preference. I don't listen to music much."

"What?" He was incredulous. "You're kidding."

I shook my head, poking halfheartedly through my unfinished breakfast with a fork and continuing to eat even though I was no longer hungry.

I didn't get why he was so shocked, but he was looking at me like I'd said something awful.

"You're messing with me," said Leon, trying for a half-hearted laugh. "Come on, what person doesn't listen to music?"

"Too busy, I guess." I shrugged.

"Not liking music is like... not liking kittens."

It was if my apathy towards music was a personal offense against him. It was a little amusing.

"I never said that. Also, I'm a dog person."

He ignored me. "We're going to have to fix that," he mused.

"Cats are fine, but they make me sneeze." It wasn't a lie. Mother and I used to own a kitten when I was much younger, but we had to get rid of it for that very reason. The treachery of allergies.

"No! Not that," he said, dismissing my cat comment with irritation. "You are in serious need of a proper musical education."
“With no phones, mp3s, or even Internet connection,” I reminded him. “Although you can still give it a try. My sister is a pop sensation after all, so I’d say it's not... completely out of the question.”

“Well, yeah,” he said, sounding somewhat embarrassed.

“I heard the phrase 'my sister,'” said Junko, surprising us both by interrupting as she turned to look at us. "What is it? Are you in need of my presence? Or perhaps my angelic singing voice?" She sung the last part.

I couldn't even tell if she was serious or not. I suppressed a laugh. "Sorry sis, but actually... maybe. Leon was just chastising me on my lack of interest in music. Apparently, I'm in... serious need of a musical education, was how it was put?"

"Oh! Maybe I can be of assistance?” she asked, the prospect seeming to catch her interest.

"Unless you can cover all genres and time periods, I don't think so,” I said. "Although I'm not doubting your range," I added. "I'm sure it's very impressive."

Sayaka, who I hadn't even realized had been listening in on our conversation, laughed out loud.

At that moment, I heard a loud crash and several of us turned our head to the noise.

Celeste sighed, and across the room lay a shattered cup of former milk tea.

*Holy shit.*

“What the fuck?” cried Mondo, eyes going wide in shock.

“Celeste, that, like, came out of nowhere!” said Hina.

Celeste did not address either of them, not even bothering to look at Hifumi standing beside her. She was not even fazed.

Hifumi wailed, his face going pale as he began to sweat. “Dear me! What are you doing, my little white rabbit?” he cried.

“I loathe milk tea such as this!” said Celeste, her voice disgusted despite her expression of apathy.

“What—? After all that time I put into making it for you!” said Hifumi, indignant with his hand on his hips.

“The milk absolutely has to be a part of the brewing process. I will not accept anything less.”

“Wait, for real? That’s what this is about?” asked Hifumi.

“I realize it can be a bit of a hassle,” said Celeste. “Even in cafes that offer proper milk tea, it is always more expensive than simple tea with milk. It takes more time to prepare, surely but…” She giggled at him with a smile that was equally as eerie as it was delicate. “Why even bother creating a menu if you are not going to offer the highest level of quality, yes?”

Hifumi frowned. “Yes, but, this isn’t a restaurant…”

Celeste rose to her feet, threatening him with the sharp armor-like ring on her index finger, the point dangerously close to his face. There was a furious glint in her red eyes. “What did I just say!” she snapped. “Get on with it, freak! Hurry up and bring me what I asked for, swine!”
Her accent was gone, in it’s place was a fury from her I’d never seen.

Hifumi squealed, scurrying off into the kitchen with haste. “O-Okay! Your little piggy will bring it out right now!”

Once he was gone, Celeste regained her composure almost instantaneously. She giggled once more. “Hehe. I do so love coercion.”

Everyone stared, not saying a word.

Mondo broke the silence. “What. The. Fuck,” he said again, this time low and under his breath.

“The hell was that about?” asked Hiro, scratching his head.

Junko was grinning ear to ear, eyeing Celeste with an expression of piqued interest. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.” She was far more enthused than I ever would have expected.

After a moment, the room proceeded to go back to it’s previous conversation and chatter. I looked around, hoping for someone else, anyone else, to address what the hell just happened. When no one said anything, I spoke up. “I’m gonna… go to the kitchen,” I said, making up my mind on the spot and hurrying over.

Once entering the kitchen I spotted that Hifumi was by the stove, preparing another batch of milk tea.

I moved so that I stood beside him, reaching for the coffee maker and grabbing what I would need to make a fresh cup. It wasn’t really my goal, but I needed something to occupy my hands.

“You know, you don’t have to do it just because she tells you to,” I murmured quietly.

“Ah!” He squeaked, jumping back in fright. “Miss Ikusaba!”

“Sorry, I startled you?”

“Yes! I’m afraid I didn’t see you there.” He was red in the face. “Miss Ikusaba, whatever do you mean?” he asked.

I shrugged. “That was pretty harsh back there. I, uh…”

I didn’t really know what else to say. I didn’t have any advice, or guiding words, or anything useful really. Perhaps I was just being nosy as always.

I was beginning to doubt myself. “You know what? Just… forget I said anything.”

He was indignant, scowl on his puffy little face. “Thank you for your concern, Miss Mukuro Ikusaba, but I am perfectly capable of caring for myself!”

“Ok.” I dropped it as soon as it was brought up. Not that I didn’t have any more feelings on the matter, but it was clearly none of my business. I turned away, over the fridge and opening it up so that I could peer inside. “Want anything?” I asked, turning over to glance back at him.

“Uh… Diet Coke?” He perked up, apprehensive and almost hopeful.

I scanned the shelves. “Sorry, not seeing it.”

“Damn it all!” His hands clenched up into little fists. When he was angry, his nose would scrunch up. “What am I going to do without my precious Diet Coke? I am going to suffer withdrawals!
Kyaaaaahh! Away, vile spirits!” His voice was booming. He panted, his whole body drooping as his expression fell. “Here come the auditory hallucinations.”

“Hifumi, please, relax,” I said.


“Kid, it’s me, snap out of it.”

“An angel is telling me to snap out of it! Is it the Love Interest?”

I didn’t like the way he was looking at me, so I grabbed his shoulders and gave him a rough shake. “Hifumi! You can’t let Diet Coke beat you!”

It was the most ridiculous thing I had ever said, but that seemed to do the trick.

“Miss Ikusaba!” he said, once coming to and realizing it was just plain old me. “You’re right, I can’t lose to the Diet Coke!” He sniffed, posture deflating. “I need to get out of here.”

I didn’t talk to Hifumi all that much, so, this was a wake up call. Boy, could he flip moods on a dime.

“You will,” I said. “Now make sure your tea doesn’t boil over.”

“Huh? Oh, that’s right! Thank you for reminding me!” He rushed to the kettle. After a moment, he spoke again. “Sincerest apologies, Miss Mukuro Ikusaba, for referring to you as the Love Interest.”

“Hm?” I asked. I waved my hand. “Oh, it’s… it’s fine.”

”I didn’t want to get your hopes up,” said Hifumi. “I’ve never broken a heart, I can only imagine the tragedy! I just felt I should give you fair warning since you are absolutely not my type!”


“My type, of course, since you would want to know,” he continued, “being fictional. Specifically the women in my novels.”

“I see,” I said, even if I didn’t really see.

“Yes! They are my source of comfort. Not to divulge too much of my Tragic Backstory, but, you know, I was quite friendless growing up.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

“Oh! Except for my sister of course.”

I nodded. “You must’ve been very close.”

“Yes, well.” He paused. “She was my biggest supporter, all these years. I don’t know what I would do without her.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead I just listened, and let him have his moment.

Probably realizing that he was getting way too sentimental, he coughed, clearing his throat. “Yes, yes! Well. It’s all very typical of a Protagonist, I should say. You know, the bullies, the tragedy, the rough childhood. If my life were a story, it would be so trite! Such a cliche! Writing kept me sane. But I swore, never again! Well, now I’m a renowned author, I sure showed them!”
I frowned. “Right. And so letting Celeste boss you around is different from that… how?” I asked.

He glared at me from behind his spectacles. “That is entirely different!” cried Hifumi, pointing an accusatory finger at me. He grumbled something indiscernible, in the process of pouring tea and loading a tray. “Forget it, there’s no way to think about this in a common sense kind of way!”

He scurried off with the tray, leaving me standing there by myself.

---

"Leon, can I ask you something?"

Somehow, the two of us had ended up in the gift shop together. The fact that it was open at all surprised me, so of course I had to investigate. And by that I meant snatch anything that took my fancy or could hold my interest for a period of time longer than a few seconds. For the most part I was just relieved there was another possible way to occupy my time other than staring at the walls in my dorm or playing guinea pig to Junko’s makeovers. Playing beauty parlor was something I had appreciated as a one time thing, but I didn't think I could handle more than just one occasion. Too much poking and prodding and sticky application. While makeup was an impressive feat of artistry, I didn't know if it was really for me.

When I had entered the shop, it had been empty of any other personnel, but at some point Leon must have wandered in without me realizing. We were at opposite ends of the room. I was near to the counter on the right, by the plush Monokumas of all sizes that lined the shelves. I hadn't really planned on saying anything to him. Other than saying hello when I noticed that he, too, was in the room, I was perfectly content with spending the time in silence; however, a question did occur to me that I was rather curious to know the answer.

At hearing me address him, he turned away from the shelves of miscellaneous products to look at me.

"Huh?" He blinked, seemingly still trying to register the question. "Oh. Yeah, shoot."

"I'm just curious... why would you want to quit swimming?"

Leon shrugged. "It's boring and stupid, and I just don't like it." He scowled, his answer making him seem a bit like a stubborn child. Upon realizing that he'd probably have to give me a bit more than that, he softened, adding, "You know how when you start out doing something, and it's great because it's so much fun, but then you do it all the time, and it starts to feel like work?"

I nodded, but I couldn't truthfully say I really understood how that felt. I'd been leaning against one of the shop's glass display counters as I talked to him, and as I listened intently I hoisted myself up slightly so that I was instead sitting on the counter.

"I guess I can see that," I said, even though I was bluffing. I thought back to our conversation the other day, "Well, if you hate swimming... during our introductions, you were saying something about a singing career. You know, before Sayaka interrupted."

"Wha—You actually remembered that? Heh, sick." His smile was so broad. He seemed genuinely pleased which was... nice.

I didn't think much of it. Remembering things was part of the job.

"Yeah, but I mean like..." I reached over and pulled a stuffed Monokuma toy off the shelf that was practically life-sized, and examined it absently. It bore too much of a resemblance to the real
thing, so I set it aside. Instead, I pulled a similar looking rabbit off the shelf and held it close, hugging it to my chest. I eyed the Monokuma doll with distrust. In any other circumstance, it would have been cute. I would have been tempted to keep the thing for myself if it wasn't so damn unnerving. But, getting back to the conversation, I continued, "You're this guy who's won a billion swimming tournaments, and you plan on leaving that all behind?"

He sulked. "Well, anything sounds dumb when you put it like that," he said. "But... I got this in the bag. Trust me, I have the vocals for it and everything!"

"But aren't you going to compete in the Olympics? That's a pretty huge deal, isn't it?" All that stuff was supposed to be hush-hush until it was confirmed, I couldn't help but ask. Sometimes rumors just weren't enough. Hell, in my line of business, you can't just accept rumors at face value. I wanted the truth, and who better to ask than the prodigy himself?

Leon crossed his arms, his expression disgruntled. "Yeah, yeah, I know... You don't think I know that? I've heard it all before..." When I didn't answer he simply kept going. "I mean, I suppose it wouldn't be so bad if I actually enjoyed myself. But I just... Don't."

He frowned, and I felt a pang of sympathy for him. Perhaps it was my imagination, but he actually sounded... disappointed. Like this was something he'd thought about a lot.

"Like. I know I shouldn't be saying this, but it sucks!" said Leon. "The shaving ain't so bad, but the swim caps are so not cool, and they don't even let me do anything with my hair because the pool will turn it green. Why does it matter! You won't even see it under the cap! And they don't like piercings or tattoos because they want the team to look 'professional' like, whatever the hell that's supposed to mean. It's oppressive as hell. And don't get me started on swimmers. You ever been on a sports team?" he asked me.

I shook my head.

"Don't do it," he said. "Look, if anyone says that band kids are worse than jocks, they're either lying or have never actually met a jock."

"Do swimmers count as student athletes?" I asked.

"Do they--!" He threw his hands up in the air. "Be glad none of my teammates heard you say that."

"But don't you enjoy the feeling of camaraderie between your teammates?"

He let out a short laugh. "Are you kidding? I can't talk to them."

Whatever the problem was, it was clear he felt no sense of support from his teammates, whether the feeling was real or imagined.

He shook is head as if to clear his thoughts. "Whatever, whatever. Anyway, all the crap aside, being a musician sounds so much cooler, right? And even better, girls dig musicians."

I said nothing, but allowed myself a small, amused grin.

He continued. "You see, there was this girl! I met her at the salon. She was really cute, and she was really into musicians." He just kept talking. The words kept tumbling out, and I didn't have plans to stop him anytime soon. Sometimes I even surprised myself with how far being a listening ear could go. "And like, maybe it is dumb that I'm giving up swimming, maybe it's not, but I should at least give it a shot. I think this is the right decision I'm making. I can feel it!"
He seemed so optimistic and self-assured. I wasn't sure whether to just brush this off. Either it was a gimmick to receive attention and he was just fickle and girl crazy or... he was actually serious in his endeavors—if perhaps a little in over his head.

"Well hopefully, once we get out of this place, you can pursue your goal."

"Hehe, thanks." He grinned. "Y'know, you're a really good listener, Mukuro."

I uttered a quiet thank you. Not that I was going to say anything, but it was actually a tactic I used sometimes to gather testimonials. The things people are willing to say when there is a nonjudgemental party who will listen. People in general just like to talk. Most of them, anyways. There were always exceptions, of course.

"Ya know, I've never really had friends who were girls."

*I've never really had any friends, period,* I thought.

My best friend was probably my mom. Although that may just have been because we never settled down in one place for a long enough time for me to make any lasting friends my age.

"I mean," he continued. "I've actually talked to a lot of girls. A *lot* of girls. Just never had many long terms friends. But I kinda like the company. They're honestly, like, so much better than dudes!" he said. "They have actually, like, standards for living. You ever been in a locker room full a' dudes?"

I shook my head.

"It. Sucks," he said. "At least the swim team is like. Not quite so hellish."

I shrugged. "I don't really see how there's much of a difference between being friends with girls or guys."

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. It stood on end, making it look even more wild than it already was. "Oh, there's a difference. I actually used to think guys couldn't be friends with girls. Pretty fucked up, right?" He laughed. "I don't know how to explain... It's like... Haven't you ever tried to impress a guy?"

"Not really."

There was this one boy, back when I was six, but we didn't talk about that. Needless to say, I discovered the hard way that investigating dead baby birds for "evidence" was not something that was considered impressive. It was a rather painful experience for myself and everyone involved, even if I ended up choosing the baby bird over him anyways.

But beyond that I'd never felt the compulsion.

My answer surprised him. He raised his eyebrows. "What, really?"

I nodded.

"I figured that was just, like, a thing for everyone," said Leon. "All girls, I mean!" he added hastily. "Heh. Hell, I think guys do it, too. Then maybe they wouldn't care so much about out-grossing each other. And trying to prove who is the strongest."

I didn't know what to say.

He scrutinized me for a moment. "You're a lesbian, aren't you?"
"I—wait, w-what?" I stuttered, his question catching me completely by surprise.

"Because I kind of had a feeling you were, which is probably why I'm able to talk to you without worrying about trying to impress you." He was sort of rambling. "Because like, you're a girl, but just the way you act an' all, you're a girl, but you're not a girl girl."

I ignored that last part, under the pretense that I knew he didn't mean it in an offensive way. "For future reference, I would recommend avoiding asking any other female friends such personal questions."

"Oh, no! I didn't mean anything by it!" he said. "I just thought—"

"It's quite alright. But, Leon, if you must know," I said patiently. "I am actually a robot, which means I have no sexual orientation."

He gave me a weird look.

"Joking. I was joking. I do that every once in a while."

He didn't laugh.

I sighed. "Right." I swung my legs back and forth, staring down at my feet to avoid eye contact. "I'm just..." I pondered for the right way to phrase it. "Not into labels," I finished, trying my very best to sound nonchalant.

*Not into labels.*

In other words, running around solving cases never really gave me much time to form attachments with anyone. It was a subject I'd put off in my own mind. Leon bringing it up again had made the question feel raw again. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been involved in a conversation anything like this.

Feelings were... complicated. Surprisingly complicated for someone who had no love life.

And anyways, it was none of his business.

I looked back up at him again. "Anyways, if you get to ask me invasive questions, then that gives me a freebie."

He rolled his eyes. "Alright, fine."

This was going surprisingly well. I was having more proper conversations with kids my age in the past two days than I probably had in the previous 5 years of my life combined.

"Hm..." I studied him for a moment, wondering whether I should just come forth and ask. I decided to go for it; the more mischievous impulse in my brain just wanted his reaction. "Tell me, what is your natural hair color?"

"My—how did you know that?"

"Your roots," I said pointedly. That plus the previous salon comment, it wasn't hard to put two and two together.

"They're showing?"

I nodded. "Don't worry about it. Detective, here," I said, pointing to myself. "I'm trained to pick up
those trivial details."

He didn't seem reassured.

First friend here, and I'd already managed to weird him out. Well, first friend besides Junko, but she was my sister, she didn't count.

"Hey listen," I said, hastily changing the subject to something more favorable. "While I was rummaging through here, I saw this Yasu Shishido t-shirt. Aaaand... you said you liked rock music, so I figured that maybe you'd like it?"

"Really?" His face lit up. "Sweet!"

"Here I'll get it." I hopped off the counter, walking over to where the shirt hung, below the bottom left shelf, in the very back. I took it off the rack and held it out to him. It was my peace offering, at least in my mind.

Leon took it from me, eyeing it over. "For me?"

"Sure."

He glanced up at me. "For serious? You're not, like, screwing with me or anything?"

"Scout's honor," I said, holding up a hand.

His face lit up. "Are you shitting me? This? This is cool. Super cool!"

_He seemed to really like it. With a reaction like that, I was feeling a bit of joy._

He chuckled. "I feel like... maybe I don't even hafta get outta here anymore." His eye twitched. He was still smiling, but now there was something definitely artificial about it. "Hah! Yeah, right! I still totally hafta get outta here."

Even in a moment of levity, there was still the reminder of our situation.

"Right," I said, my laugh half-hearted. "I know it won't solve our problems, but I..." I shook my head. "I don't know what I was thinking." I felt stupid.

"...That it would make me feel better?" he asked.

"Something like that."

He nodded. "Ah, the band-aid solution. Gotcha."

"Yep," I said, popping the "p" and bobbing my head awkwardly in a sort-of nod. "Band-aid solution."

The words hung in the empty air.

"Hey, look," he said. "It's cool and all. I appreciate you pointing this out to me. It's still totally sick, fucked-up hell-school aside. And you're awesome."

"Thanks?"

"For real! I mean it, yo." He started, as if hitting a moment of realization. "You want my autograph in exchange? 'Cause I gotcha covered—"
"Leon."

"Huh? Heh, oh, I'm doing a thing, aren't I? Sorry, it's a reflex, what can I say?" He rubbed the back of his head, smile apologetic.

Ok, so the personality took a bit of warming up to, but he could be a charmer. What a smile.

"Hey, forget it. We're... we're cool," I said. "Just... think of it as... a souvenir."

"A what now?"

"Souvenir? You know, like a 'I survived the School of Mutual Killing and all I got was this t-shirt' shirt."

When he gave me another weird look, I decided it was probably best to drop the jokes.

"Uh, yeah. Sure," he said.

He glanced at the stuffed rabbit I was still holding, then to the Monokuma still sitting on the glass case, then at me with a questioning look. "You're not actually gonna keep that thing are you?"

"Maybe," I said, giving the rabbit a squeeze. I was growing rather fond of her. That gremlin sitting on the counter on the other hand... "Not the other one though. It gives off to many 'I have too much free time so I force kids to murder each other for my enjoyment' vibes, ya know? Kind of defeats the purpose of a cute stuffed toy."

I didn't really know what to do with it, so I grabbed the thing off the case and held it up, and we looked at it together. It smiled at us. We didn't smile back.

"Maybe if you cover up the right side..." His sentence trailed off before he finished it. He knew exactly how ridiculous that suggestion sounded.

"Hm... I think it squeaks if you press its stomach."

"Try it."

I did, and just as I thought it would, it emitted a loud squeak.

I held it out to him. "Want it?"

"Hell no," he said adamantly. He shook his head, pushing it away. "That thing's creepy as hell."

Deciding I'd had enough of the squeaking facsimile of our tiny monochromatic captor, I put it back on the shelf where it belonged. It made another squeaking noise as it was set down.

When I turned back around, Leon was watching me.

"Mukuro, we're friends now, right?"

"Sure." The answer was reflexive. We were at the point of "sure". He'd earned that much.

"Can you do something for me?"

I paused. "... Sure."

Ok, it was less reflexive. I could agree we were friends. I was less keen on agreeing to favors before
I knew what they were.

"Junko is your sister, right?"

I could already see in what direction this was going.

"What can you tell me about her?" he asked.

I shut down. "Leon, I only met her yesterday, just like you. Hardly know a thing about her."

"Nothing?" he asked, expression falling in disappointment. "At all? She seems so cool! I love her style. And her confidence! Like... What kind of music does she like?"

"Ask her yourself." I was slipping back into my usual reserved self. "Although sis can sometimes be... strong-minded. Don't tell her I said that," I added, "I care about her very much, and she's never been outright mean. At least. Not to me. But you've seen how she can be."

Leon was nice, but I didn't like the idea of him hanging around Junko. She was my little sister, after all.

"Gotcha..." He looked to be in thought before shrugging and grinning.

He didn't seem to be discouraged. I didn't know what to make of it. I didn't think he'd be the kind of guy to pursue if it was too much work. And Junko, bless her soul, would definitely have been work. I was mystified.

"Anyways, I'm beat. I'm gonna head out of here. See ya, Mukuro!" And with a smile and a wave, he was gone.

I stood there alone in the school's gift shop.

Well, at the very least, it looked to me like he had a really good time.

Chapter End Notes

It's a free-time chapter. Its supposed to be filler-y. I am sorry. Just pretend Junko is singing "Popular" during the makeover scene. It made me feel better. Also you guys can have some input as to the next character to get free time development, so please leave a comment.

Edit: oh my god I sent this out with so many mistakes I am so sorry.

Edit (2017):

2013 me: won't this joke be funny of Leon mistaking Mukuro for a lesbian?

2017 me: Mukuro is such a gay
Chapter 1.3: The (Almost) Party Crasher

Chapter Summary

ch [1.3 are motive chapters most likely.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"May I join you?"

The following afternoon I had entered the cafeteria for a bite to eat--only to see Kyoko sitting by herself. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something in me was compelled to join her.

Kyoko looked surprised at being approached. At my question, she didn't speak, but nodded slightly. I sat down in the seat opposite her.

I looked around. Many of the other students were in the room as well, making polite small talk and eating. However, I noticed that Junko was not among them. Perhaps she was in her room. I could always find her later.

Thankfully, I found upon searching the cafeteria, Junko no longer seemed to be on Leon's mind. He and Sayaka were sitting at a table, having a cup of tea. They were chatting animatedly with each other.

"—No really, I was bright red for days," said Leon, clearly in the middle of a story.

She laughed. "Oh my goodness, I have the same problem. Can't tan to save my life. Last summer when I came back from vacation all sunburnt and peeling, my poor manager nearly fainted when she saw me. 'Course, they'd rather I stay out of the sun anyways because of all the shoots. I mean, I get it, but it's all nonsense."

I turned away so they wouldn't see my staring. Leave it to Sayaka to get along with anyone. She really was a sweetheart. Not that I had expected a self-absorbed diva, but you never knew what to expect with famous model types.

It wasn't that I didn't like Leon. After talking to him, I realized he was actually an alright guy. But there was something about him... We just didn't "click".

At a separate table, Hiro and Celeste were sitting together having a conversation. Or more accurately, from what I could pick up from the little I heard, Hiro was trying to cajole her into reading his fortune, but Celestia was having none of it.

"Come on, Celeste."

"No," she said, her tone firm.

"Please?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Absolutely not."
"Well, why not? Just one fortune. It doesn't even have to be a good one." He pouted.

She scoffed. "Do I look like I'm running a charity?"

The corners of my mouth twitched in a small smile, amused at Celeste's ability to endure Hiro's... muchness.

Kyoko made no attempt at conversation, but instead sat silently in her seat.

"How are you Kyoko?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said briefly, not looking up at me.

She didn't elaborate any further, so I continued. "Been having fun?" I asked, more as an attempt at humor than a genuine question.

She stopped looking down at the table and looked up at me questioningly.

I smiled wryly. "Yeah, me neither."

Just then, Junko walked into the room, in what appeared to be enthusiastic conversation with Hina and Sakura.

"--Yeah, I know what you mean, but my arms get so flabby, I just can't for the life of me build muscle there," said Junko.

"Seriously! Weight training, it works miracles. Trust me," said Hina.

Sakura nodded in agreement.

"You should join me and Sakura for workouts!" said Hina.

"I agree. You are most welcome."

"Oh, I doubt I could keep up with you guys," said Junko.

"Come on, it'll be so much fun!" said Hina. "Sakura is such a great workout partner, she really motivates me to hit my goals."

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I could have sworn I saw Sakura blush and stammer a soft 'thanks' in response.

"Pass," said Junko. "Although if you have a specific ab workout you can hit me with, by all means. Because like..." She scanned Sakura up and down. "Goals."

Hina laughed.

"Begrudged to admit it, but I've been trying to eat healthier, too, although I can't stand it," said Junko. "Da--My manager insists though because I need to be able to 'run around the stage' or some—" She must have caught me looking at her because she paused mid-sentence when she spotted me. "Hey, big sis!" She waved, sauntering over to me, Hina and Sakura following and sitting down beside her.

*Those two seemed to have hit it off,* I thought. Since day one, they'd been inseparable.

"Makin' friends?" Junko asked.
"Mhm." I was being facetious, but only a little. I looked up at her standing beside the table, and back at Kyoko.

"Actually, I was just leaving," said Kyoko.

"Aw no, don't go!" said Junko, and I couldn't tell if it was sarcastic or if that was just her usual intonation.

Kyoko sighed, getting up. "I'm getting a drink." Turning away from the rest of us, she walked brusquely into the kitchen.

Junko pulled up a chair, its feet screeching painfully against the tiles. Turning it around so that its back was facing the table, Junko sat down with us. "So.. whatcha been talkin' about?"

"Um... Nothing actually," I admitted.

"How boring."

What was the response to that? Instead, I changed the subject. "Well, what were you guys talking about? Before coming over here."

"Oh, just swapping tips." Junko waved a hand carelessly. "You know, skincare, workouts, that boring junk. Hina was just telling me about her daily workout."

Hina's eyes lit up, as if struck by an idea. "Hey, Mukuro!"

"W-What?" I asked, getting an uneasy feeling.

"Why don't you join our workouts?" asked Hina, still bounding with enthusiasm. "I'm sure if you came along, then maybe we could nab Junko, too."

"I--I'll think about it," I said, or more accurately, lied.

Of the few times I'd been to the gym, the worst part was always being surrounded by people who were ten times more fit than you could ever hope to be. Even if deep down, I knew it was ridiculous, I could never shake the feeling that others were watching me make a fool of myself.

"Well, if you ever want to join us, hit us up," said Hina. "I hate skipping a day. If I don't do something active, I get restless."

Sakura nodded. "Same here. Plus, I find comfort in routine. And I find it much more encouraging to work out with a partner rather than going solo. Don't you agree, Hina?"

"Oh, for sure. That's part of the fun. People care so much about the numbers and that's not what it's supposed to be about, ya know? It's like sports. Sure, winning is nice and all, but you shouldn't be out there for yourself. It's about the team, right? There's nothing like the feeling of a team at the top of their game, who knows each other so well on an off the field."

I'd never been on a real competitive sports team, but I nodded nonetheless.

"Ha, the way you guys talk about working out makes it almost sound enjoyable," said Junko. "I'm almost tempted to take it up again."

"Then do!" said Hina.

Junko groaned. "But I don't wanna."
"Mukuro, can you bug your sister for me?"

"What for?" I asked, now curious. "Like I can influence anything Junko does, and you know it."

Junko stifled a laugh behind her hand. "It's true and you should say it."

"It's not fair. How do you look so perfect?" said Hina. "Look at her, Mukuro. Her skin is amazing, but she won't tell me her secret!" Hina pouted, folding her arms, but I could tell her annoyance was still in good fun.

"And a secret it shall remain," said Junko. "What's the big deal? If you get acne, just use concealer."

"You guys wear makeup?" I asked.

Both Hina and Sakura nodded.

"You mean, you don't?" asked Hina, shooting me a quizzical look, eyebrow raised.

At this I could feel eyes of the other girls on me, making me immediately feel self-conscious. I shook my head. Even Sakura, the last person I would expect to care about that sort of thing, seemed to care about how she presented herself to others.

"I think I'm going to grab some donuts," said Hina, standing up. "Anybody want anything?"

"Can't," said Junko. "As delish as that sounds, I'm trying to be good and not cheat my diet. But thanks, hon."

"No! You can afford to be indulgent," said Hina. "Cravings are important. Your body needs nutrients!"

Junko sighed, getting up from her chair. "Fine, but I'm going with you 'cause I wanna choose something myself. I'm not having any of that processed, fried shit."

She followed Hina into the kitchen.

Sakura and I sat a moment in silence before she finally spoke.

"For the record, the offer always stands if you change your mind," said Sakura, her voice soft and level.

"Sorry, I--w-what?" I asked.

"If you change your mind about wanting to work out, Hina and I would be glad for a new face."

"Oh, I--I said I would consider it, didn't I?" I said, suddenly feeling guilty for lying. Did she know?

"I realize that," said Sakura, her eyes piercing. She sighed. "Hina has been very kind in inviting the others to join us. I think it is an attempt at getting me to socialize, since I admitted to her that I felt out of place here. But I feel as if everyone is off-put by my stature and my demeanor. Still, I appreciate the gesture."

"That's very nice of her," I said. "She must be a good friend."

"She is," said Sakura, and I could see her the corners of her mouth were upturned in a small smile. "I don't often get presented with the chance to make female friends. I know that we only just met, but she feels very special to me."
"I'm glad," I said. However, another part of her confession was pressing at me. I frowned. "But why do you feel out of place?"

"I... I feel like an outsider. I think the others are scared of me due to my title. I--" She looked down at her hands, avoiding my eyes. "I shouldn't be admitting this to you, it is unsightly and unwarranted."

"No, no, I'm glad you are telling me. You know what?" I said. "I'll take you up on that workout. Name a time and place."

"Thank you, Mukuro, but I fear you are only doing this out of pity."

"Not at all!" I said, perhaps a little too rushed, but I tried to mean it as much as I could. "I'm sorry for not saying yes sooner. I was just... self-conscious, you know?"

"Self-conscious?" asked Sakura, so surprised that she looked up at me again.

"I... You guys are so fit," I said, feeling my cheeks heat up. "I just don't have the same dedication as you two," I admitted. "I didn't want to slow you down."

"It's no trouble," said Sakura, never wavering in her patience. It made turning her down that much harder. "Everyone starts somewhere. I apologize for misinterpreting the situation."

"Thank you for being understanding," I said. "I just... Honestly, I don't know how you bring yourself to do it every single day. I probably would've given up a long time ago. You must be very disciplined."

"It's not always easy," said Sakura. "It does take discipline, as you say, I admit. But the more you get into it, the more natural it will begin to feel."

"I guess I've just never found a good reason to keep the habit," I said.

"That is true. It can be tough without motivation," said Sakura.

"I doubt anything is tough for the great Sakura Ogami," I said with a smile. "Come on, what could possibly faze you? You are so strong."

"Thank you, Mukuro, but I am not made of stone. I have to be strong. I am a woman surrounded by men. Yes, they are men I would trust with my life, but as their leader, I cannot show weakness."

"That sounds awfully... restrictive," I said.

"In some ways, yes," said Sakura. "In other ways, it's freeing in ways you could never imagine. I answer to no one. I can go anywhere. But... Weakness has no place in our world. One screw-up, and it's over. You could die. Or put everyone in jeopardy. And I could never live with myself if that happened. That's why I have to be strong. These men, they rely on me. I have to protect the people I care about."

"You must be an amazing leader," I said. For a gang leader, she was so... disciplined. So devoted. So honorable.

"I do what I can," said Sakura. She shook her head, hands balled up into tight fists on the table. "The idea of... being stuck here. Not knowing what is going to happen. It's driving me mad."

"I understand. But at least something has come out of it, right?" I asked.
"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Because now you have Hina."

"Right." She nodded, once again smiling to herself. "Now I have Hina."

As if right on cue, Hina and Junko returned to the kitchen with their snacks.

"Miss us?" asked Junko, pulling up a chair. Hina sat down next to her, too busy chewing on a donut to speak.

"Oh, yes, we were desperately awaiting your return," I said, shaking my head and smiling.

"Fuck off," said Junko, nudging me, and I laughed.

While Hina and Sakura were caught up in conversation, Junko took the time to look over at me, nudging me with her elbow. "I saw you and Leon together in the gift shop. What was that about?"

"What?" I asked, confused. I was a bit thrown by the sudden change of topic.

"I mean, are you guys talking or what? Come on, spill," she prodded.

"You know I'm not much of a conversationalist, sis."

She shoved me in annoyance, although it was too light to really be anything other than playful. "Oh, you know what I mean."

I hesitated momentarily before giving her a playful shove in return. Gently though. Gently.

"Actually, he was asking me about you," I confessed.

Her eyes for a moment widened in surprise, but they then narrowed, her eyebrows raised and jaw set. "What?"

"Mhm." I shrugged, not quite sure why she seemed so pissed off. "Seems to have a thing for musicians. Wants to be one himself."

Junko didn't seem to be listening anymore. She gritted her teeth. "Son of a bitch," she hissed quietly to herself. She shook her head. "Just what I need, more creeps drooling over me. I leave the real world and come here to the wonder world of murder and tragedy and it still follows me like a shadow. Would it be so hard to meet someone... real? As if that doesn't make the love-ban hard enough."

"Love-ban?" I asked.

"Idols aren't allowed to date," she explained, still sounding cross. "Ruins their 'image' or whatever." Heavy quotation marks with her fingers. "Allowing desperate creeps to cling onto the smallest hope that they have the ever-so-slightest chance of landing you is part of the appeal of the gig. Even though, you know, they have a fucking shot in hell." Her voice was thick with sarcasm. She shook her head more vigorously. "Nope, Nope, nope, nope. I told myself I wasn't getting involved with musicians. I am d-o-n-e, done with them."

"How come?" I asked, intrigued.

"Too much baggage," she explained.

"But... you're a musician," I said, brow furrowing in confusion.
"My point."

Realizing that was probably the best answer I would get, I sighed.

Junko was seething. "I'm gonna slap the dye right out his hair."

"Huh," I said, unsure whether I should laugh or not. "So I'm not the only one who noticed."

She rolled her eyes. "Please, I can spot a bottle-job from 20 meters."

"Shit, and they call *me* the Ultimate Detective." I grinned.

"Hey, maybe I can be your assistant!" she suggested eagerly.

At least she was no longer mad.

"Heh, maybe... Hopefully it won't come to that though."

"Hey, who says we need a murder in order to do any investigating?" She partially covered up her face with her hand, her first two fingers and her thumb sticking out and the other two tucked away so that her eyes were still visible. "Elementary, my dear Watson." She spoke in a serene, serious voice.

Kyoko came back from the kitchen, holding a cup of coffee. She sat down across from me, eyeing my sister then looking over at me with a deadpan expression. "Do I want to know?" she asked me.

"Not sure yet," I said, fighting a smile. I looked back to Junko. "Uh, sis?"

She continued in her mysterious voice. "After brief analyzation, I've come to the conclusion that you're a B average student, wear a size seven shoe, your favorite color is purple, and you have one really awesome younger sibling. It's obvious, isn't it?"

"Size seven and a half, but nice try, Detective Enoshima."

She maintained her collected poise. "I could get used to this."

"Well, don't get too comfortable. If you steal my title, I'm pretty much screwed. I can't sing half as good as you."

"False, I know you can sing."

I shrugged. I might've been passable, but I was no pop idol.

"Do I look cool?" Junko quirked an eyebrow.

"The coolest," I told her. "Although I don't usually do the hand thing. That's new."

"It's my signature. I like being a detective. Makes me feel cool."

I chuckled. "Being a detective makes me feel cool, too."

She directed her attention towards Kyoko. "Let's see... If I had to guess, I'd say you're a runaway with some severe daddy issues."

Kyoko went pale, then bright red.

*Shit.* The last thing I expected was for Junko to be right on the money.
"Junko!" I scolded her. "Are you alright, Kyoko?"

Her only response was to nod slowly, but she seemed to have composed herself by then.

"I'm sorry, Kyoko. Junko's mouth doesn't always have a filter," I said, giving my sister a pointed look.

"Hey, I resent that!" said Junko indignantly, breaking the facade as her arms fell to her side.

"It's alright," answered Kyoko, not addressing Junko but myself. She shook her head slightly, as if brushing off anything unwanted. "It seems to be a family trait."

I knew she was referring to the incident the previous day concerning the map. That was fair. I had put her on the spot; I supposed that I deserved to be called out for that. I held my tongue. Regardless, I was too embarrassed to even know what to say.

The sound of loud voices and footsteps alerted us the the fact Hifumi and Toko had just entered the room. They were in the middle of a very loud, very heated discussion which was somewhat surprising, considering the fact that Toko rarely was one to start conversation. Her attitude wasn't... always the most inviting. She wasn't exactly what one would call approachable.

Nevertheless, there they were, each with an expression of irritation that mirrored the others.

"—And so we can obviously conclude that the author's 'Word of God' is the most valid interpretation of a body of work," said Hifumi haughtily. He was using his rare, deep authoritative voice, the one he always used when he was acting self-important. "You have to take the work in isolation. It all makes sense when you think about it."

"Yes, b-but even if you are the creator, once you put your work out in the world for people to see, people are g-g-going to interpret that h-howevers they may based on their own experiences, and those interpretations are just as valid as——"

"To misconstrue my argument, it's just! Do you not hear me? I am not saying that those perspectives are worthless. Ooooh, you don't publish and sell your own original works, you couldn't possibly understand! To have your characters wildly misinterpreted; well that should be a crime in and of itself!"

"Euggeeggeehhhh... W-what is there to misinterpret?" I noticed that her stutter was less frequent when she was riled up--although it was also more pronounced. "All the women in your books are one-dimensional wish fulfillment fantasies."

"Hmph!" He glared at her, a strange glint flashing through his glasses. "You're one to talk about wish fulfillment fantasies."

"What's that supposed to mean? That j-just because I like d-doujin or write f-f-fan f-f-fict--fan f-f-fictio--fics--that I'm trash? That is what you're implying, isn't it?" She pointed an accusatory finger at him.

"Well!" He huffed indignantly. "For the record, I'll have you know that this antagonistic rapport is absolutely not a come-on in any way because you, Miss Fukawa, are absolutely 100% not my type! The only point I was trying to make is that author's intent is the truest form of interpretation. It is absolutely obvious!" He exclaimed in a booming voice.

"You're completely wrong. Author's claims don't completely i-invalidate fan interpretation. There's s-some worth in that, otherwise why would fanfiction be a thing? Ugh." She made a noise of
frustration. "D-don't answer that. I can't b-b-believe I'm wasting my time. This is all a joke to you
isn't it? Quit l-laughing at me. Don't lie, I kn-know you are."

If I were to make a guess, I'd say that her talent was a development of the desire to have her voice be
heard by the world in some way. She was bound to feel pretty isolated, whether she truly was or not.
Not that I was any sort of expert or anything.

"Let me guess. Friendless shut-ins?"

I turned to the familiar voice.

Junko looked to me then over at the pair of them who were still arguing. She was putting on her
detective persona again.

I nodded. "I would have... phrased it differently, but." I paused, finally admitting, "Yeah, probably."

"Which I'm guessing resulted in a desperate craving for positive attention and praise from the outside
world?"

I gave her a mocking suspicious look. "You sure you're not out for my job?"

She chuckled. "No, but I do like to think that I'm a pretty good people person, that's all."

Just then we were disrupted by the sound of my name.

"Miss Mukuro Ikusaba! You will back me up in what I am trying to say, won't you?"

Before I could answer, the two of them were already heading in the direction of our little table.

"What? I... No... I mean..." I fumbled through my answer, uncomfortable at having been put on the
spot. I kept glancing toward the exit, wondering how weird it would be if I were to just book it. "Are
you sure you wouldn't rather get the opinion of someone who is more well-read than myself?"

"No!" moaned Toko, ignoring me completely and still addressing Hifumi as she tugged at her hair.
"W-why are you asking her? Are you still trying to prove how wrong I am?"

"Nonsense, Miss Mukuro Ikusaba!" He turned to Toko. "She is clearly a human being with some
intelligence. Everyone likes a girl with intelligence."

I hid my face in my hands, hoping to hide my red face.

"Gross!" said Toko. "No one wants t-to hear about your pervy fantasies. If they d-did they could just
p-p-pick up a copy of your 'books'." Her voice went up higher and higher in octaves the more
indignant she became. "So that's it then! I'm wrong, just like always!"

I tried to pacify her. "Nobody is saying that you are wrong, Toko—"

She ignored me. "Ohhhhh, just go away, Porky. I'm convinced this whole non-conversation was just
a set-up. I bet you j-j-just want--to make fun of me."

"Porky!" He cried. "You take jabs at my appearance without knowing the pages' true content! This
'porky' individual happens to be the one of the most brilliant young minds of our day and age!"

Beside me, Junko scoffed. "And people call me vain and self-absorbed," she mumbled. "Yeah, I
mean vanity is great and all, but nothing beats good old-fashioned egotism, right?"
I snorted.

Without warning, Junko stood up from her chair. "I'm hungry. Come with me to the kitchen, will you?" she said abruptly to me.

"Oh," I said, not sure what was going on but nevertheless playing along, "Uh, alright."

We went over to the kitchen, subsequently leaving Kyoko sitting with the two arguing newcomers whom she seemed to be trying very hard to ignore.

First thing I noticed when I entered the room was Chihiro standing in front of the open fridge. She smiled and waved when she saw us come in--a gesture which we reciprocated.

"I'm not actually that hungry," Junko confessed to me in a low voice. "I just needed to get out of there."

Near the counter there was a large pile of dark red apples among the even larger stash of various fruits and vegetables, all in pristine condition. How the school managed to get ahold of fresh vegetation in its condition was a mystery unto itself.

Junko picked a top one from the pile and offered it out to me. "Want one?"

I took it from her hesitantly and looked at it. It was red and shiny, almost like something you would see in an advertisement. I didn't eat it though, not yet. "Where do you think all this food is coming from?" I asked, still examining the red fruit in my hands.

I heard a loud crunch.

"Hm?" said Junko, her mouth full of apple. Presumably she had taken another one for herself and had just bitten into it.

"Where do you think Monokuma is getting all this food?" I repeated. "It all seems fresh."

She shrugged, taking another bite of her apple.

"Actually, I had been wondering that myself," said Chihiro from behind us.

I turned to face her.

She was no longer by the fridge but standing just behind us. "I mean... you can't just save fresh fruit forever, right?" she mused. "He must be keeping it somewhere."

I nodded. "It's so strange."

"Huh?" asked Chihiro. "What's strange about it?"

"Well," I said. "It just opens up so many questions. I mean, there's only two possibilities I can think of."

"Which are?" asked Junko.

"Well... Think about it. Either there's some sort of... place here where everything is grown," I explained. "Or... if it's not grown here, it has to be delivered, right?"

Chihiro's eyes went wide. "Oh! I see now!" She frowned. "But, I... never mind."
"No, no, what is it?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm... I'm just confused. If everything is being grown here, where is this place? And if it's being delivered, isn't the fact that the school is practically uninhabited... doesn't that worry anybody in contact with the school?"

"Exactly," I said. "We need to think about these things." I was in thought. "You'd think if he was planning to keep us here for a while, the food would be more along the lines of dried or canned food," I said.

"Canned food?" asked Chihiro.

"Oh my god," said Junko, coughing and nearly choking on her apple. "Don't tell me you don't know what canned food is."

"I... I know what it is," she said, perhaps a little too defensively. "I've just never had any before."

"Don't worry, you're not missing out on much," said Junko, still munching away. "Unless you want to experience the authentic feeling of being sad and broke firsthand."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand..."

"Don't worry, kiddo, you probably won't ever have to understand. Want one?" She held out an apple to Chihiro.

Chihiro took it with a quiet "thank you", but didn't eat it.

"Sit with us in the dining hall?" I asked Chihiro.

"Really?" For some reason, she hesitated. "I don't know... I should probably get going."

"I insist."

"Well..." Her face lit up in a beaming smile. "Alright, then. Of course!"

Junko sighed, turning to me. "Alright, well, I guess we can't stay in here forever anyway. Poor Kyoko looked so uncomfortable when we left her there with War and Famine." Her words were sympathetic, but she looked as if she were trying not to laugh.

When the three of us went back into the cafeteria, we saw that the group of people in the room had actually grown in size. The first thing I noticed was a very fed up Kyoko still sitting at the same table. Said table had been nearly empty save for her just a little while ago; however, it was now filled with students having rather loud conversations--the new additions being Makoto, Taka, and Mondo. She and Mondo appeared to be in the middle of a conversation.

"—I fail to see how that's a problem."

"I can't. I won't do it, sorry," said Mondo, holding up his hands in resignation.

"You said you wanted a sparring partner. I am more than willing to spar you," said Kyoko bluntly.

"Hello, Mondo!" said Chihiro, beaming at him.

He looked up at her. "Hey kid," he said gruffly, but in an almost affectionate way. He turned back to Kyoko. "Look I'm sorry, I don't fight chicks. I just don't want to hurt ya, ok?"
Junko cut in. "You know, she's a trained soldier. I don't really think hurting her is that much of an issue. She could probably take you out before you even knew what was happening. With both eyes closed and one hand tied behind her back."

Kyoko cut in. "Excuse me, I am perfectly capable—"

Junko ignored her, cutting her off. "Holy shit. She pulled up a chair from the table next to ours and sat down, with the chair facing backwards like before. She looked around. "Is everyone here? Did you guys invite everyone so that you could throw a party without me?"

I spoke up. "Hello, Kyoko."

She glared up at me from her seat, presumably placing me at fault for the ever-expanding group of people at the table. I didn't really think that was fair. It wasn't my fault Hifumi had zeroed in on me. In fact, getting roped into their spat was the exact opposite of what I wanted. However, based on the look she was giving me, she certainly blamed me.

"Actually," mused Junko, who appeared to be talking to herself. "...That's not a bad idea. 1, 2, 3, 4..." She did what appeared to be a quick count of the people in the room. "15. Who's missing? Byakuya? Ah well, who needs him anyways."

"I don't like where this is going..." said Makoto, sounding uneasy.

"Come on, 'Kuro. Back me up here!" Junko pleaded, tugging on my arm.

"For what?"

"Weren't you listening? We should have a party!"

"A party?"

“Yes! Come on, it'll be great. It's a fantastic idea. Right, Makoto?"

“Well... It would be a good way for everyone to get to know each other,” he said although he still sounded uncertain.

"Exactly!"

"Wait, I didn't necessarily—"

She ignored him, having already gotten the nod of approval, at least in her mind. "Guys, what do you think of having a party?" she called out to the rest of the room.

"Ooohhh, that sounds perfect actually."

"Splendid! Ha ha ha, how very festive!"

"Fuck yeah, what's the occasion?"

"Euggghhhhh..."

"I'll take that as a 'yes!'," said Junko. "Right, so we're gonna have to organize this damn thing first." She squealed, practically jumping up and down. "Oh, I'm so excited!" She was talking very fast. "It's just so unfortunate that I'm not gonna be able to pull out all the stops, what with our limited resources."
The sound of static was heard from the speakers on the wall and without warning the monitors flickered on to the display of Monokuma's face. Everybody turned to face the small screen on the cafeteria wall.

Junko groaned loudly and dramatically, as if to display to the entire world the depths of her disappointment and frustration. "Ugh... Not you again! Go away," she snapped.

"Nyohoho!" the bear cackled. "No can do, princess. There's been a lot less killing than I had been hoping for, and I'm not happy."

"Princess?" she cried.

Makoto spoke up, directing his voice toward the monitor. His expression was cross. "Well, if you were hoping for a bloodbath, you can forget it. Nobody here is killing anyone."

The bear shook his head in disappointment, his tone morose. "I don't understand what went wrong. I've got the setting, circumstances, weapons, participants... Oh that's right, motives! How could I have been so foolish as to forget?"

"Motives?" asked Hina, sounding uneasy.

"Of course! Even with everything properly set up, people always need a catalyst. Why don't you all head over to the A/V Room? I've got a very special gift for each and every one of you." His grin, forever plastered on the creature's face, seemed even more mischievous and prominent than usual.

"Seriously? You don't even let me have my fun before you ruin everything with your creepy gifts and crap about 'motives'? Junko was not so much anxious and worried like the rest of us. Rather, everything in her behavior indicated she was simply disgusted and very put-out, as if she had been punished by a parent--rather than arguing with our captor over the incitement of murder.

Monokuma didn't answer her. The screen went blank, which left the fifteen of us alone in the cafeteria, giving each other nervous looks. Nobody was sitting anymore, the mere sight of Monokuma must have been enough to make everybody rise to their feet.

"So... Should we just stay here, or..." Hina's voice trailed off, her question hanging in the air.

"I think we should just go," said Kyoko, level-headed as always. "Rather than to question it or wait and see what will happen if we don't."

On a personal note, I was rather curious to see what the motives were, even if going seemed rather risky.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence. The first one to break it was Sayaka.

"I don't want to go. I have a bad feeling about this," she said, her voice quavering.

"Well, surely at some point everyone's curiosity will be too great," said Celeste. "I'd rather we all just go together so that there are no secrets. Everyone just knows. We don't know the alternative. At this point it seems easier to just comply," She remained as cool as ever.

"We should have more trust than that," insisted Makoto. He raised his voice so that everyone could hear him. All eyes were on the small boy, but it was as if his voice reached every corner of the room. He took a deep breath. "Okay. We'll go. It's best if we all stick together. But just so everyone knows," he added. "I would like to believe that nobody here would ever kill somebody. No matter what Monokuma throws at us, we must not give up."
The video room was not hard to find; it was right next to the entrance hall and the gift shop. Nevertheless, the dark green walls were strangely eerie combined with the poor lighting--although it could have just been the nervous atmosphere.

In the end, we had all decided to go. Even Byakuya, who hadn’t even been in the cafeteria with the rest of us when the announcement had been made, but he’d seen the message on a monitor outside the cafeteria.

To be fair, the mood was not exactly lively, but he looked about as pleased as ever to be in our mixed company.

"B-Byakuya, you’re here!" stuttered Toko in surprise as he entered the A/V room.

"Of course. Byakuya wouldn’t want to miss anything involving technology," said Junko.

He ignored her. "I wouldn't want to fall behind in the game."

Hina glared at him. "It's disgusting how you can call this a game."

"Nevermind," said Kyoko. "Let's just see what this is about." She sounded about as excited as the rest of us at the prospect. However, any traces of fear or anxiety were undetectable. The woman was like stone.

The room was even more dimly lit than the hallway, with at least sixteen stations where monitors were set up, along with one large screen at the front of the room. At the closest station, there was a small cardboard box. Taking a peak inside, I didn't know what to expect—maybe something sinister?--but inside was a stack of DVDs. Each one had a name—one of our names—scrawled on it in what appeared to be marker. I selected the one with my name on it and sat down at one of the monitors, as did the rest of my classmates.

I put the disk in the slot, pressed the power button, put on the pair of headphones that was sitting at the desk, and waited anxiously.

As soon as the monitor came on, the first image present on screen was one of my mother.

*What is this?* I thought.

She was smiling at me from her seat in the worn-in armchair that sat in the tiny living room of our tiny, cramped, old, shoebox of an apartment. I could see the drab window curtains hanging in the background, the ones I had always hated.

"Hello, dear."

Her familiar voice, although altered slightly throughout the speaker, was soft and comforting as usual, but perhaps it was more noticeable due to the fact that I may have been just a touch homesick. Hell, her presence alone was comforting, despite the fact that I knew it was only a recording.

I could feel my eyes watering. "Hi, Mom," I answered back, unable to help myself, my voice breaking. I felt a strong urge to reach out and touch the screen, as if by doing that, I could somehow reach through to her. But it was only an image.

"Have a good time at school, honey. I'm proud of you."
She smiled. She actually smiled, the effect reaching her the crow's feet on her hooded eyes that were the same shade of blue as mine. I always looked much more like her than Junko ever did, what with our freckles and black hair—albeit hers was much longer and typically worn in a braid, and interspersed with the rare traces of gray.

A part of me, the more irrational and definitely more homesick part, was hoping in vain that she wouldn't ever leave. I just wanted her to stay. Was that too much to ask?

The other part of me wondered when exactly she had filmed this footage.

The screen went black, flickering back on after a brief moment, but the only thing on the visible was static.

Slowly the picture came back, and the image was still of our apartment living room, only something was clearly very wrong.

The apartment—our apartment; the one that was always slightly too dark and too small and was always too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter and always smelled a lot like the numerous books that lined the shelves everywhere and was always making a new home for some odd new contraption or tool; the one with the ugly mug-stained old coffee table that was always littered with Mother's work; the one where we could settle down and relax together when one or both of us came home from a case; the one that had finally started to feel like home after years of moving from place to place—was completely trashed.

The room was dark, the lamps broken, the window shattered, the curtain mangled and torn, the contents of the coffee table all over the floor. The old armchair had been turned on its side.

But the worst part, was that my mother was nowhere to be seen.

I couldn't speak, all I could do was stare, transfixed, at the screen in horror. I could hear through my headphones cries from the other students, the panic in their voices mirroring my own emotions. My own voice was caught in my throat. I could feel a scream rising, ready to burst out of me, but any strength to speak died upon my lips.

Words flashed across the screen in big bold letters:

"World-class detective gone missing without a trace! Are you ready to solve this mystery, Ultimate Detective? Will Detective Ikusaba ever reunite with her daughter? Find out after GRADUATION!"

The monitor went black.

"Mom?"

Mom!

I removed my headphones, still in a state of shock. I could now clearly hear the distress of other students. Looking around the room, everyone looked as panicked as I felt.

I've got to get out of here.

I shuddered. Had the room always been this cold?

I've got to get out of here. I can't stay. I need to leave.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "Junko?" I called, standing up. There was no answer.
"Sis?" From where I stood, she was nowhere to be seen.

At the monitor beside me was Makoto. His face was ashen and he had this sort of blank, hollow look on his face. I'd never seen him this shaken.

In fact, all of my classmates appeared in varying degrees of shaken: from Toko's frantic muttering of "Why this? Why this?", to Sakura's resolute silence and Mondo's anger, to Chihiro and Taka who seemed to have been driven to the point of tears, to Byakuya and Kyoko who seemed very unsettled even while maintaining their composure.

"How can this be?" cried Taka. While he was already a frequent crier, he looked beyond the point of tears straight to completely and utterly devastated.

"No, no, nononono," said Hiro, speaking more to himself than to anyone else in the room in panicked chanting. "This has all gotta be a sick joke. My--My--"

"What--What is this?" asked Hina, her face ashen. "They're messing with us. It has to be fake. Please tell me it's fake! There's no way they'd be able to pull something like this off, right, Sakura?"

Sakura remained silent.

"Sakura?"

"Not now, Hina."

"But--"

"I said not now!" snapped Sakura, voice booming in the darkness. Fists clenched, hair standing on end, her anger sparking electric and somehow more terrifying than we had even anticipated. She'd been reigning it in for so long, I couldn't even recall the sound of her raised voice.

Directed towards Hina of all people, it was even more peculiar and frightening to see her composed exterior crack.

"I-I'm sorry..." said Hina. She had been shocked speechless, and eyes watering to the point of tears.

Sakura looked equally as horrified with her own behavior. "I must go."

Just then, I heard the sound of rushed footsteps along with a click and the creaking of an opening door. I turned in time to barely see an unmistakeable head of strawberry blonde hair disappear as it slipped past into the hallway.

"Junko!" I called. On instinct, I ran after her into the hall. "Junko!"

I didn't think. There wasn't time to think. My sister needed me!

Once in the hall, I ducked into the nearest classroom only to find, to my surprise, a familiar figure already standing in the middle of the room, facing away from the door.

I closed the door behind me, it clicking as it closed shut, but if she heard me, she didn't say anything.

I approached her cautiously. "Junko?"

She didn't answer.

"Junko? Sis?" I reached out a hand, placing it on her shoulder.
"Don't touch me!" she cried, tearing away from me and fleeing to the far left corner of the room although she was no longer facing away.

I tried to reason with her. "Junko, it's me. It's your sister." I approached her again, and this time she stayed where she was although I wouldn't try to touch her again even if in an attempt at comfort.

"I don't want to die," she whispered, barely audible.

"I know."

She was trembling. "Just... Don't leave me, ok?" Before I knew it, her arms were around me, and she was hugging me and crying, her body wracked with sobs.

"I won't. I won't, I promise." Not quite sure what to do, I patted her awkwardly on the back. "I'm here for you. I'll always be here for you. Never forget that."

I let her stay like that as long as she needed to. "Those videos..."

"They're fake," I said. "They have to be. Mom is... There's no way the Mastermind would be able to pull a stunt like that off without having everyone in the outside world in a panic... right?" I was trying to convince her, but deep down I wasn't sure if I really did a good job.

Maybe I was also trying to convince myself.

She sniffed, finally letting go of me and wiping at her eyes. "I'm sorry for. All that."

"Don't be," I told her. "Listen, we're going to leave this horrid place. The two of us are going to leave together, I promise. As your big sister, I'm going to keep you safe. Okay?"

She nodded.

"Okay."

---

"Are you alright, Makoto?" I asked. I had returned to the video room a little later that evening. It was empty now, save for the two of us. He was still sitting down at the same monitor as earlier as though he hadn't moved an inch.

"Oh!" He turned in his chair, startled to see me standing behind him. "Sorry, Mukuro, I didn't see you." He smiled although I could see that the usual warmth in his kind smile was only half-hearted from wearyness. "I'm..." He frowned. "Actually no, I'm not ok."

"It's alright, neither am I."

When he didn't answer, I continued cautiously.

"What did you see?"

"... My family."

I don't know what compelled me to do it, but I sat down on the floor beside him, sighing.

"Me, too," I said. "Well, my mother, anyway."

I didn't know why I was telling him this. I normally wasn't one for sharing. But... I felt like I could
trust him. Maybe that was what it was.

He seemed surprised at my actions, but he sat down next to me on the cold tile floor. "You don't have any family besides your mother?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. Not until I met Junko... Do you have any siblings?" I inquired, turning to look at him to see that he was looking at me as well.

He had a curious look in his eyes. "One," he answered. "My little sister, Komaru."

"And how far would you go to keep her safe? Would you do anything?"

I stared at him intently, needing some sign, any sign or reassurance. I needed to know that this new feeling of overprotectiveness just came with the perks of being the older sibling. I needed to know that it wasn't just me.

"Mukuro?"

"Don't worry, I don't plan on killing anyone. But I'm going to do whatever it takes to keep Junko safe. Anyways, I've seen enough tragedy in my life."

He sighed, hugging his knees. "Are we ever going to get out of here, Mukuro?"

My gaze strayed away from him. "I don't know."

"I don't know what to do. I'm the moral compass. I'm supposed to know what to do. I want to keep everybody safe. It's part of my job." He sighed. "Right now, I feel like I'm failing. School is supposed to be a safe place. It isn't supposed to be like... like this."

I wasn't quite sure what to say, so I stayed silent.

"As scared and desperate as I am to get out of here, I'd never be able to kill anyone," said Makoto. "It's hard to believe that somebody else here might be different."

I admired his idealism, even if I could never be on the same page. "I learned quite while back that... some people have very different agendas and prerogatives."

"I understand," he said, turning to look at me once again. "I realize we haven't known each other for long but... but you guys are my friends. I trust my friends. I mean, I would like to be able to trust everyone here, and for everyone to do the same for me. As far as I've seen, the people here are good. I have to believe in that."

I nodded. "I agree. They're all decent kids."

I said it, and I really meant it. They were odd, yes. A little eccentric. Reckless, irritating, cryptic, unpredictable, irresponsible, even sometimes scary.

But good.

For a while, all we did was sit together in silence on the cold, uncomfortable, speckled tile floor.

"You looked really nice the other day, Mukuro," said Makoto, first to end the silence.

I flushed red, hoping that maybe he wouldn't notice in the nonexistent light.

If he did, he didn't say anything.
"Thanks, Makoto."

"During our introductions I was actually kind of intimidated by you," he admitted sheepishly. "But you're actually really cool."

"Intimidated?"

"Yeah, you know, because you don't talk much. It makes you seem all serious and business-like."

"Huh."

I furrowed my brow. I'd never really thought about it, but perhaps I did look unapproachable.

"Although I guess the moral of the story is not to take everything at face value," he added.

"Or the moral is not to hit people with doors."

"You make it sound like I did it on purpose." He pouted. "I really am sorry about that, you know."

"It's fine. How about on our way out, you let me hit you with the door so that we're even."

I got up from my little spot on the ground and offered out a hand to him.

"Deal?"

He laughed, taking my hand, and I helped him up. "Deal."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you lovelies for being so patient. Please do comment, feedback is always appreciated.
Chapter 1.4: Death of the Author

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this took so long! Hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For the next few days, there was an uneasiness in the air that made it difficult of everyone, including myself, to relax around each other. Makoto suggested that that we still eat together for breakfast. His reasoning was that hopefully it would help the camaraderie and we could put all our bad thoughts aside. However, I could not suspend my suspicion that it was also simply to keep people within eyesight of each other. It was a morbid thought, but if that was part of his reasoning... it made sense.

I mostly kept to myself. I had always been somewhat of a reserved, so it really wasn't much different from usual. Nevertheless, it was disappointing. By choice or by opportunity, I'd never been one for socializing. However, despite the circumstances, I'd sort of begun to enjoy the company of others. So noticing that I was falling back into old habits was difficult.

Even Junko wasn't one hundred percent herself. She did seem to be spending a lot time with me, something which I'd grown to appreciate.

Aside from my sister, the person that I probably spent the most time with was Makoto. He was just a very friendly person, and I found myself drawn to him. Most of our conversation involved polite small-talk, but there was something comforting about how trivial it all was. Despite being 'moral compass', he was surprisingly relaxed and laid-back--which was definitely a breath of fresh air in comparison to the intense personalities I'd come to know. I also was beginning I realize I had misjudged him. Upon first impression he seemed to be very soft spoken, but that was only in the day-to-day. When he wanted, he could actually be an assertive and strong leader, and the more time I spent with him, the more I grew to respect him.

In short, he was a really easy person to like.

Once in our conversations, he spoke to me about his belief in trusting other. Believing in the good of humanity and that is what gave him hope. He also explained to me that this belief was what informed his life, and was also why he received (or more so stumbled) upon his title. It wasn't really a goal of pursuit: he just really wanted to strive for that moral goodness that he believed in. He wanted to make a positive impact on others, and maybe provide the support and example others needed to also do some good in the world.

Perhaps his beliefs were naive. After all, he wasn't a detective. I seriously doubted he'd never seen the things I'd seen, so it was hard to take him seriously at times. If people were all good all the time, there would be no need for detectives. However, his optimism was so palatable that it was kind of contagious. Even this grim, world-weary detective wanted to believe in this "goodness of humanity" when I was with him.

The unease that had settled in the atmosphere for the past few days was beginning to diminish, not just for me but for everyone. By this time, the group breakfasts were pretty much carried out from force of habit. Not to mention, if we tried to get out of it, Makoto would simply cajole us back into going. He was surprisingly effective in his powers of persuasion.
Regardless, even if we were adhering to the group breakfast agreement, people definitely did not feel pressured to change the pace of their daily routines. In general, people fell somewhere on a spectrum: from the early risers to the people who seemed to consider time as a non-issue. I usually fell somewhere in the middle. I'd always considered promptness to be at least of some importance, but, not being an early bird, it was hard for me to really seize the day with a sense of urgency.

Junko was one of those early risers. Which was at first surprising, but perhaps considering her profession it made sense. Idols were incredibly busy people. On more than one occasion she had rung the bell to my room to come down to breakfast only to find that I was still sleeping. The fact that my sister could not only wake up but also get herself fixed up all pretty and still somehow be done earlier than I could even wake was both baffling and impressive.

The other early risers consisted of Makoto, of course, along with Sayaka, Kyoko, Hina, and Taka. Next were the people who arrived around the same time as myself, and those were usually Sakura, Mondo, Chihiro, and Hifumi. Hiro, while good-intentioned, tended to get lost or sidetracked on his way, so he was late about as often as he was on time, so with him it was always up in the air. Last ones to arrive were usually Toko, Byakuya, a Celeste, and Leon.

The morning of what would be our seventh full day together was the first time this changed.

Hina was the first to notice.

"Hang on. Someone is missing..." She looked around the room, perhaps doing a mental headcount. "Where's Hifumi?" she asked, a note of alarm in her voice.

"He hasn't left his room all morning," replied Celeste, not even bothering to look up as she sipped on her tea.

That struck me as odd. A part of me was surprised she'd even notice something like an absence, since Celeste rarely showed great interest in others. Others seem to found it strange as well because upon noticing the odd looks she was getting she finally glanced up.

"What?" she asked, eyes wide in a feigned innocence I didn't buy. "I tried ringing his room earlier, but he didn't answer."

Makoto got up from his seat, an anxious expression on his face. "I'd better check to see if he's alright," he said.

"I'll go with you," I said, almost on a reflex, not know what exactly prompted me to behave in such a way. I just... I just had the strangest feeling. Getting up in a hurry, I followed him out cafeteria.

We rushed to the room marked with Hifumi's nameplate, the two of us pausing just outside. Makoto hesitated before he knocked on the door.

"Hifumi?" asked Makoto, knocking again.

There was no reply.

We exchanged anxious glances.

"Let me try." I buzzed in. "Hifumi are you in there?"

Still no answer.

"Maybe he already left the room," suggested Makoto, but it sounded half-hearted at best, like even
he didn't believe it.

"I'm gonna try the door."

"But it won't open from the outside without Hifumi's ID, you know that."

I ignored him. I had a sick feeling, but I was hoping against hope that I was wrong.

I was reaching out my hand when we heard the static, indicating the speakers being turned on as Monokuma's voice rang throughout the room.

"Attention! All doors relevant to the investigation have been unlocked. Be sure to search to your heart's content!"

The monitors went static, and then the air went dead again.

Makoto looked at me, worry apparent in his wide eyes. "That can't be good."

I said nothing, only placed my hand on the door handle and turned. We both heard the click that indicated that the door was indeed unlocked.

We looked at each other with confusion, even if I had been preparing myself mentally for this what this possible outcome could mean.

For a moment, we said nothing, just stood there in silence. He sighed. "I guess we have to go in, don't we?"

I didn't answer.

He shuddered, as I pushed open the door, creaking ominously as it slowly swung in.

Even bracing myself, I could feel my heart sink at the sight before me.

Line of work be damned, nothing could have prepared me the sight of Hifumi's corpse laying there, slumped against the wall, a knife impaled deep into his chest.

Makoto went pale. "Oh no..." His voice was barely above a whisper

"Mukuro!" I heard Junko's voice calling from down the hallway. "Are you alright? We all heard the announcement on the speakers. What do you think is going--" She poked her head through the doorway. "Are you guys—"

Her eyes fell upon Hifumi's dead body, and she let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The monitors clicked on once more.

"Ding dong bing bong! A body has been discovered!"

If I hated Monokuma's sickening screech of a voice before, it was nothing compared to now.

What seemed like the rest of my classmates entered the room, pushing and shoving as they went.

"What on earth is going on?" asked Taka. "We heard screaming!"

Silently, Junko pointed a shaky hand to Hifumi.

Eyes falling upon the body, Taka let out a horrified gasp. Several of the others cried out as well.
Chihiro began to cry. "This can't be happening. What are we going to do?"

"Oh sweet, you're all here!" a familiar voice called with a cackled.

We all whirled around to see Monokuma grinning broadly at us, no longer behind the monitor and instead present and in person. "So I don't have to rush you all down to the gym. Such a pain. Puhuhuhuhu! That wouldn't been such a waste of time. Imagine having to devote all the time and energy to moving locations just so that I could deliver some exposition!" He laughed again.

"You!" said Makoto, hands balled into fists at his side, already looking like he was ready to take a swing. He glared at Monokuma, furious, more angry than I'd ever seen him. "This your fault!"

"My fault?" said Monokuma. "I'm not the killer here!" That stupid grin etched upon his face seemed to mock us. "Don't shoot the messenger! I just came to deliver a present!"

"Present?" asked Sakura, her tone stern, short, like she was losing patience. "What present?"

"My Monokuma File!" He beamed at us, to which we could only stare back blankly in return. "Isn't it just sweet of me to give you so many hints in a helpful little file?"

"Perhaps, but I suppose I do not see their point," said Celeste. "After all, if you enjoy to watch us suffer so much, why help us at all?"

"Well, for the class trial of course!"

"Class trial?" asked Makoto.

"Yes! So that we can approach this on fair ground. Gotta even out the odds somehow! No one likes stacked odds! Where is the tension? The drama? The intrigue? The showmanship?"

Leon scowled. "So the big guy in charge hates the idea of a power imbalance. Yep. No irony there."

"Well, I'm sure it's more fun to draw out the game of cat and mouse this way," said Byakuya. "More survivors equals more opportunity for future trials. Don't worry, I'm sure we'll manage."

"You're a confident one!" said Monokuma. "Okay, so I take it this is everyone. Well..." He did a quick count. "Gloomy isn't here, but that's a given. Just fill her in later, will ya? I'm a very busy bear!"

"Gloomy?" asked Sayaka.

"He must mean Toko," said Celeste. At seeing the others urgent looks, she added, "Toko is fine. She is standing in the hallway. I don't think she handles gore particularly well."

"You say it like its a horror film," muttered Leon.

"Enough, already!" said Monokuma, finally snapping with impatience. "Basically here's the lowdown. You guys get to do some investigating for... a period of time."

I didn't miss the pause.

"How much time?" asked Kyoko, as if she could read my thoughts.

"As long as I feel like!" he snapped again.

"I'd feel much more comfortable knowing the parameters of our investigation," said Kyoko. "That
includes the time limit."

Monokuma feigned a yawn. "But that's so boring! I like it much more like this. Keeps you all on your toes. As I was saying, when time's up, I'll call you all down to the court for a class trial. You discuss and argue and deduce--it's all very exciting and riveting, yada yada yada. And at the end, you take a vote on the culprit. If the majority is correct, then you live, and I execute the culprit. However, if the majority votes wrong, the culprit goes free! And... everyone else gets executed instead."

*Whoa.*

What an entirely new pressure to unload on us. Now we had an additional fear to worry about--and fear could only motivate so much. I was sure it would do more to cloud our judgement than provide any sense of clarity. But maybe that was Monokuma's intention all along I could see the uneasy looks of everyone throughout the room.

"Holy shit. You--You've gotta be fucking with us. Execution? What does that even mean?" asked Leon

"Execution means execution! I mean what I say and I say what I mean!" snapped Monokuma

"But that means... one of us, if not more than that... is going to die!" said Makoto

Monokuma's red eye sparkled. "That's the idea! Isn't it great? Either way, someone's getting offed tonight. Puhuhuhuhu! And about time, too. I was beginning to think it would never happen. Alright, well get to it. You only have so long, so investigation start!"

He disappeared.

Everyone was in various states of distress and grief.

"What are we going to do?"

"Oh dear..."

"How in the hell are we supposed to figure this out?"

"This is so horrible. Please tell me this isn't happening."

"Please, everybody calm down."

I paid little attention to them, their reactions nearly fading into just being background noise.

I could feel the grief, stronger than I had expected, washing over me, but I did my best to let it pass. Emotions clouded judgement, and now was not the time for that. I was devastated by the loss of our classmate, but if we didn't figure this out, there were going to be even more people in danger. Right now, I had a job to do. Still, I couldn't help but feel a little heavy-hearted at the loss of one of my classmates, even one I didn't know particularly well.

For a moment, I just stood there, not really ready to move.

I was experienced with crime, yes, but this was a lot more personal. Possibly even more real. Hifumi wasn't always nice. He wasn't always pleasant. But he was a person. And he was a part of our class. It felt like only a second ago that we were having casual smalltalk. It was only a few days ago that we'd chatted in the kitchen. We barely knew each other, but he'd felt trusting enough to tell me about his sister.
As a detective, my job was always to discover the truth, no matter how painful it may have been. But on a private note, I at least hoped seeking justice for Hifumi could afford him some peace.

I knelt down beside Hifumi's corpse, ready to examine it. In the background I could register Makoto suggesting that there should be two people assigned to keep watch of the crime scene at all times. We needed volunteers.

Mondo raised a hand. "I'll do it."

"Thank you, Mondo," said Makoto.

"We ought to have two guards," said Kyoko. When the others shot her questioning looks, she added, "Just in case."

"I suppose that does make sense," said Byakuya. "Two guards. That way, they can keep an eye on one another."

"You saying I'm not trustworthy?" asked Mondo.

"Oh, absolutely," said Byakuya. "But don't flatter yourself, it's not suspicious in any exceptional way. In fact, if it helps you sleep at night, you're hardly any more suspicious than anyone else here."

"A.k.a., Byakuya's just paranoid," said Junko.

"All the same, I think Kyoko is right," said Makoto. "Believe me, I do trust you guys, but but I think as a whole it would make us feel better if we had two people keeping guard."

For some reason, when Makoto explained it, it seemed to have more of a convincing effect on the others.

"Fine," grumbled Mondo, but his fists were still clenched tight.

Hina looked to Sakura, and she shook her in response. It was a strange moment; something unspoken seemed to pass between them.

"You have me," said Sakura. "I will make sure nobody interferes with the crime scene."

Makoto nodded. "Thank you, Sakura."

If the others felt that they could entrust them with this task, then so could I. After all, Makoto seemed to trust them. I hoped that would be enough.

Now, I had my job. The others had theirs. It was time to investigate.

Looking at the body, the cause of death appeared to be the knife wound in his chest. Examining the handle more closely, it looked to be a cooking knife, meaning it must have come from the kitchen. However, he also appeared to have suffered at least one blow to the head, judging by the large bruise that was dripping with blood. That could mean that the culprit had used something to hit him over the head.

I made a note to check for anything that possibly could have ever been used for that purpose. Weapons could be crucial pieces of evidence.

I paused a moment before continuing. Normally, it didn't take much to faze me, Hifumi was a classmate. At the very least, it felt invasive, if downright wrong to be doing this. However, I needed
to keep pressing onward. I took a deep breath. Upon examining his body more thoroughly, I found no more injuries inflicted upon him nor any objects upon his person.

I'd been so entrenched in my work that I hadn't even noticed when Makoto approached me. He was beside me to the left, and to my surprise he actually caught something before I did.

"Mukuro," he said. "Come look at this."

He pointed to something on the wall behind Hifumi. I leaned over to see symbols painted on the wall and blood. There were three, two circles and a line, rather sloppily done. It looked like... a name.

I glanced down at where Hifumi's hand lay limp. There was no blood.

Strange.

There was definitely something conflicting there.

"Hifumi wrote this?" asked Sakura. I hadn't even realized she'd been watching us.

"It's possible," I said.

I didn't want to give too much away when I didn't know the whole story myself. I didn't want to put ideas into people's heads. They could be led astray. People were meant to come to their own conclusions.

The most obvious assumption to make was that they were letters, but for the time being I was not sure of the full meaning behind them. Perhaps I would understand once I got a better view of the whole picture.

Continuing my investigation, I found that there as no hair on the carpet or anywhere else in the room, not even hair belonging to the victim. Hair was usually a fairly helpful clue, but the fact that there was none did indicate something: the culprit had attempted to cover up their tracks between the time of the murder to now.

I searched through all his drawers and through every nook and cranny of the room, but I couldn't find anything. My main goal was to find anything that could be a prime candidate for the weapon that had struck Hifumi.

There were a good number of books, some of them fairly large in size. However, all of them were either linen-bound or paperback, and considering the amount of blood from the wound, using any of these books would have just left a stain. These were all clean, if they were more than a little worn. Their condition made it seem as though they must have been very loved by their owner.

My heart sunk. Just the thought made me sad, but I pushed my feeling aside for the time being. More importantly, the fragility of the books made the likelihood of a secret murder weapon hiding amongst the many volumes seem even less possible.

Searching through his room, I also found his toolbox at the bottom of one of the drawers, still unused. I put it back, seeing that it appeared to be irrelevant to the case. None of the objects in the toolbox fit the weapon's profile.

While the boys all got tool kits, the girls instead got sewing kits. Personally, I didn't seen the need for such a disparate distinction, besides outdated gender stereotypes. Why not give both kits to students? Or maybe neither kits. Sure, these tools had practical functions, but knowing Monokuma, you had to figure their true intent was to be used as murder weapons. It made the distinction even sillier. Yes.
Girl weapons must go to the girls, and boy weapons must go to the boys. That was the true order of nature.

Besides, all this meant that Hifumi didn't have a sewing kit anyway. However, I doubted any of the needles in the kit were used against him, anyway. They didn't match any of the wounds on his body. So the tool kit was out of the running. However, along a similar vein, I eliminated the sewing kits from the possibilities as well.

"He was struck in the head," I muttered to myself. However, I was aware that Makoto was standing right next to me. Normally, I preferred to work alone, but there were times when Ic could someone with whom I could talk things through. It could be helpful, the additional perspective. "Which means there was probably something used as a weapon."

"Probably?" he asked.

"Yes. It's not certain, but considering what the wound looks like, it seems very probable. It would have to be something pretty heavy though. Does anything here fit that profile? It doesn't have to be in this room."

"Check the trophy room." It wasn't Makoto who answered, but a much gruffer voice.

We turned to address the speaker, and to our surprise we realized it was Mondo. He'd been standing nearby, still guarding the scene.

He shrugged. "There's tons of stuff in there. You're bound to find somethin'."

"Go check the trophy room," I told Makoto. "Let me know if there's anything suspicious."

Just this once, I figured I could cover more ground if I got some help. We had quite the limited time frame, after allI didn't like being to reliant on others, but I figured if he found something, I could always check to confirm it for myself.

I turned to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" asked Makoto.

"The kitchen. I'll catch up with you."

"Oh, ok."

Before I left, I spotted Byakuya in the periphery of my vision. I hadn't even realized he was still in the room. He seemed to be reading over the Monokuma File provided in our student e-handbooks. I was surprised at his silence. Usually by this point there would be a haughty comment, but he seemed very into his own investigation.

On the upside, I was reminded to check my own Monokuma File. Taking a look at it, it stated: Hifumi Yamada died from a blow to the head with a large blunt object. His death was instantaneous. However, he sustained several additional blows to the head. Additionally, the file stated that he was stabbed at some point by a knife. All this happened between Night Time Hours and this morning.

In the hallway right outside the room, I nearly bumped into Toko. She seemed to pay me no mind. Rather, she was keeping to herself, shaking her head and muttering.

"Are you alright, Toko?" I asked.
She looked at me with suspicious eyes. "W-Why are y-you asking?"

"Because I'm worried," I said, truthfully but shortly. I did want to make sure she was okay, but I had other matters to attend to.

She didn't seem convinced, but at least she stopped glaring at me.

"I-I'm alright," she stuttered, looking away and at the ground. "I'm j-just not very good at handling blood is all."

Not sure what to do, I gave her an awkward pat on the back. It didn't seem to do much. I spent a minute or two trying to help her calm down, but in the end I still had to leave her. I felt bad leaving her to her own devices, but there were other areas of the school I needed to investigate.

Entering the kitchen, I found that Hina and Chihiro were already there, in conversation. Upon my entering, they both said their hello's, to which I replied in kind.

"How are your investigations going?" I asked them.

"Oh, I'm... taking a break," said Hina with an apologetic smile. "I wouldn't know where to start with the whole investigation thing in the first place. I figured I could grab something in the kitchen for Sakura while I'm here, too."

She seemed on edge, despite her smile. I chalked it up to our predicament. It was hard enough for me to handle; I couldn't imagine how the others were taking it.

"Right now I can't even bear to look at poor Hifumi," said Chihiro, head bowed sorrowfully. "I-I'm sorry I can't be of more help. I'm being so useless. But I swear, I--I will do what I can! I just... Just need some time."

I shrugged. "It's alright."

I was a bit concerned that the two of them didn't seem to have a stronger sense of urgency about the whole situation. But I needed to remind myself, everyone needed to deal with the tragedy on their own terms. Pushing something as grueling as an investigation on those who were more vulnerable would probably only hurt them. And I doubted it would improve our chances by much, anyway.

The knife appeared to be part of a matching set, so I was able to confirm that it had indeed come from the kitchen; however, there wasn't much else to find investigation-wise in the kitchen. At least the time wasn't a total waste. While I was there, Hina suggested that I check the trash room, so at least I had a new lead.

Since there was nothing left for me to see in the kitchen, I made my way over to the trash room, hoping there might be some new evidence. However, I found my way barricaded by a locked screen.

"Hey!"

I heard a familiar voice call to me, and I turned around to see Monokuma standing right in front of me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him crossly.

"No, no, you can't go any further! Only the janitor can open the door!"
"The who?"

"Only the janitor can open the door!"

"Alright, well who's that?" I was already irritated, but I didn't have time for his games. Whoever this janitor person was, I needed to find them as soon as possible.

"Only the janitor can open the door!" he repeated more forcefully. "They're the only one who has the key." All at once, he disappeared from sight.

I sighed in relief. Just his disappearance could alleviate my mood. Still, my reprieve was short-lived. Deep down, I knew he was bound to be back later for the trial.

Well, with the room locked off, my best bet would be to just take a look at it from where I stood until I could find this "janitor." Because the incinerator was blocked off by a grate, I couldn't actually approach the thing, just examine it from a distance.

The first thing I noticed--in fact I had seen it when I first entered the room--was that the incinerator was actually still on.

Perhaps someone had left it on. But my question was how. Only a person with the key to the grate seemed to have the capabilities to even get near the incinerator, let alone turn it on.

To my surprise, despite my lack of access, the trash room still had potential for clues. They were hard to make out, since they were near the incinerator and behind the metal grate, but I could still see them. They looked to be a broken glass ball and a burned scrap of a white shirt. The broken ball sat below a large button that seemed to be "on" switch to the incinerator.

Now, if the incinerator was still on, I considered two possibilities: the last person who accessed it forgot to turn it off, or the last person to access it was not able to shut it off.

If it was the latter, I could see something like, say... a big metal grate obstructing the culprit.

However, this raised more questions. Why would the grate prevent someone from shutting the furnace off, but not prevent the person from turning the furnace on? Either the gate blocks the entire process, or the gate is up for the entire process. It didn't make sense.

I tried to think about it in another light. Not about turning the furnace off, but about turning it on. If the grate is in the way, how would the furnace turn on?

Perhaps, they were able to turn on the furnace using alternative means.

Means such as... throwing something.

The gaps between each bar on the metal screen certainly seemed wide enough to fit a ball.

The full picture was getting clearer. Putting together the clues from the trash room and the message on the wall, I was finally starting to develop a theory.

I headed back to Hifumi's room in order to find Makoto. He wasn't there when I checked, so he must've been occupied. Still, I needed to find him. I was itching to find him.

"Where's Makoto?" I asked Byakuya, who was standing beside Hifumi's body and appeared to be in deep thought.

"He left."
I huffed in frustration. "Yes, but where to?"

"How the hell should I know? He's none of my concern." He scowled at me. "I'm busy."

I decided there wasn't much more I would manage to get out of him, so I left to find Makoto somewhere else.

Perhaps he was still in the trophy room.

Much to my dismay, he was not in the trophy room. However, I did find Celeste.

Since I was already there, I took this opportunity to search this room for clues as well. Examining the trophy cases, I could see one of the glass cases was shattered. Inside, there were the remains of a trophy that looked snapped clean in half. It had been screwed to the floor. That thing had been nearly three feet long and was made of wood and metal. It definitely could have been the weapon I was looking for all this time.

However, it was gone. I had no idea where it went, and I had no clue if I would be able to find it.

Before leaving, I decided to ask Celeste something I had been wondering. "Celeste, in the incinerator room there was something that looked as if it could be a crystal ball. Was it yours?"

"Oh my," she said, hand over her open mouth in surprise. "However did it get there?"

"So then it was yours?" I asked.

I was surprised at her reaction. She was usually so impassive.

She nodded. "It must have been misplaced. Although if truth be told, it's actually made of glass. It's completely useless. It's more of a prop, you know?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, I have a real one," she clarified. "My actual crystal ball I would never misplace. Although I haven't been able to find it the entire time I've been here." She sounded sullen. "Isn't that ironic?"

"Well, hopefully you'll find it," I said. "Although can you remember where you last left the glass one? If you don't, it's alright, but it could be helpful."

She shook her head. "I gave it to Hiro. He's been trying to get me to read his fortune ever since we got to this damn school, so I let him have it. I was hoping it would shut him up."


"My apologies for not being a more helpful investigator," she added. "The whole idea of running around searching for clues is just not my cup of tea. Also, I am feeling a strong sense of grief at this entire situation that I cannot even explain myself."

"It's not a problem. You've been very helpful."

I couldn't bring myself to be truly mad at anyone who didn't want to investigate... although it was a little disconcerting that so many people seemed to be ok with pushing the responsibility onto me.

I waved to her on my way out of the trophy room.

Of course, the universe would never allow me to take my eyes off where I was going without being
punished for it, so I ran directly into someone, causing us both to go crashing to the floor.

"Ow!" said the other person. "Ok, I take full responsibility for the door thing, but this one is your fault."

"Makoto!" I flushed with embarrassment, sitting up, as did he. "I was actually hoping I'd run into you although I definitely didn't mean it in such a... literal sense of the phrase."

He didn't answer.

"Sorry," I muttered, hurriedly standing up, offering out my hand to help him up which he gratefully took.

"It's alright," he said. "I was actually looking for you, but I guess you were doing the same. I wanted to let you know about the missing trophy, but I'm guessing you already know about that."

I nodded. "We'll look for it if we have time."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"In the kitchen? No there wasn't really anything there for me to find. Although I've been meaning to ask you, do you know who the janitor is? I was hoping to take a closer look at the trash room."

"Oh! Well, about that... Monokuma actually gave the key to me. And I figured we could keep a schedule, so that every person could have janitor duty for a week."

"Then who's the first one?" I asked him.

"Oh... See, the thing is... It's actually Hifumi."

I didn't say anything.

"Mukuro?" he asked, looking at me apprehensively.

"Well..." I sighed wearily. "That changes everything."

"I don't understand."

"If the culprit knew Hifumi was the janitor—which is entirely possible—they could easily burn they're evidence."

I began heading back down the hall to the return to the trash room.

"Mukuro, where are you going?" asked Makoto, doing his best to keep up with me.

"I want to show you something," I said, not breaking stride or turning to look at him. "It's the perfect crime, don't you see?"

"What is?"

"Kill the janitor and you can get rid of anything without anybody finding out or any trouble."

"What are you going on about?" he said, sounding exasperated.

"I think it's a set-up."

"What is?"
"This." We had reached our destination. I opened the door, showing him inside the room. "What does it look like to you?" I asked him, gesturing towards what sat behind the metal screen.

He peered through. "It looks like... Someone used whatever that is to hit the switch to the furnace?"

"Exactly. Yet I searched Hifumi's room top to bottom as well as did a full body investigation and never found the keys."

"Full body investigation?" He grimaced.

"Yes Makoto, weren't you listening?" I said impatiently. "Now this could mean that he misplaced the keys, but I think the reason why they're missing is because the culprit took them."

"And that's why they left the furnace on, along with the leaving the crystal ball there?" asked Makoto. "Mukuro, I'm afraid I'm not quite following."

"Think about it, Makoto. Why would the culprit need to use any of this to turn on the incinerator if they already had the key?"

"Perhaps they didn't know," he suggested.

"That could be the case, but it does explain why Hifumi would be the victim, doesn't it? Kill the janitor and you can burn any evidence that you need to. That's what all this is about." I pointed again to the broken glass ball. "The culprit wanted to lead us off the scent. You know, fake evidence to lead us astray. All this time I thought it was..."

My mind was going a million miles an hour.

The dying message, the glass ball... I thought I had known what they meant. I had taken the bait. I was wrong, so wrong.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "There's got to be more. Listen, don't say anything to anyone else about the janitor thing. At least, save it for the trial."

"Oh, well—" began Makoto, but I wasn't listening.

"Maybe there's something I missed? I... I need more time."

But just then, the familiar static of the speakers came on. I could feel the dread creeping through me as they spoke the last two words I wanted to hear.

"Time's up!"

Chapter End Notes

I know my writing is usually a lot more dialogue heavy than this, but I felt like this was more appropriate for an investigation. So I apologize this probably didn't have as many quips or funny scenes in it, but it is a game about murder, so I guess that should probably be expected?

Also I would like to apologize for being a cliche, since literally falling for each other is
like the oldest trick in the book.
Chapter 1.5: Trials and Tribulations

Chapter Summary

It's time for the trial! Who will it be?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for taking.... 4 years... to update...

A note! Someone commented SUPER recently which… thanks? Comments even on abandoned works are so appreciated. So actually… I recently played the English localization so I am continuing, however, there are going to be some changes. First, the names. From now on, I’m not using honorifics, it’s too hard for me to keep track. Since I replayed with the English localization, they don’t use honorifics, I would prefer not to try to attempt getting them right and messing them up. Secondly, everyone is using first names from now on and nicknames from the canon english translation. As much as I personally dislike the English nicknames, it’s for the purpose of consistency. Same goes for the spelling of the names. In terms of referencing the localization, I’m not calling the killers “the blackened” though. My excuse? I just don’t want to. They’re still going to be “culprits”. Additionally, Monokuma is going to be referred to as Monokuma, not Monobear, although it doesn't make much of a difference..

I also would recommend you go back and re-read ch 1.4 as a refresher, because I cheated a little bit and changed a couple details. I was 16 at the time, I feel like I could've done a better job. The changes make it more consistent with this new update. It's fairly short, so it shouldn't be too much. However, I did make some tweaks to the previous chapters as well (including the name changes), so if you would like you can also re-read the other chapters, but it's not quite as important.

Be prepared for a really long, dialogue-heavy chapter! It’s 15 kids all standing in a circle and arguing, much like the game!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wait for the elevator doors to open was deathly quiet. "Nerves" was a good word to describe it although "dread" was probably even more accurate. Looking around the dimly lit room, I realized all of my classmates were not yet present.

"Where’s Kyoko?" Makoto asked as though voicing my thoughts aloud.

Sayaka answered. "We haven't seen her once since she left the investigation scene."

He looked at me, as if searching for an answer, but I shook my head. I was just as in the dark as everyone else.

The silence continued. I turned over all the clues in my mind, trying my utmost to piece them
together—despite how little we had to go on.

"So... What do we do now?" Makoto murmured quietly, and I knew the question was intended for my ears only.

"What do you mean?"

"If all the evidence we've gathered is fake, then what good is it? What are we going to do if it's all been useless?"

"Not useless," I corrected him. "It can still be helpful in some way." Even false trails could be unintentional clues.

"But if it all points to the wrong culprit, then how is it helpful? It was put there intentionally to deceive us."

"I'm... not sure. Not yet, anyways. Things will become clearer during the trial." Even as I said it, I knew it would take more than just words of reassurance to convince him. All the same, there was some truth to my words. It tended to be easier to put the pieces of a puzzle together after observing the suspects for a little while.

"What exactly do you plan on doing once we get in there?" he asked skeptically.

I sighed. "I'm gonna wing it."

"You can't be serious."

I could feel his disbelieving eyes on me, but I ignored him. "You'd be surprised what you can learn when you let everything unfold."

"Something is off. Isn’t the case too ambiguous? How can you possibly be so confident?"

"Has anybody ever told you that you ask too many questions?" I said irritably. My mind was still buzzing with too many questions of my own. I wasn't really confident, not in the slightest. I wasn't comfortable with the idea of having to bluff my way through something as serious as this when our lives were at stake. It definitely would not have been method I would typically choose, but what other options did I have?

Just then, Kyoko entered the room without so much as a word.

"You're late," said Taka as he addressed Kyoko, his arms crossed.

"I was busy." And that was the only explanation we were to receive because at precisely that moment the doors to the elevator opened.

The elevator ride to the courtroom was just as bad if not worse than the wait for the elevator itself. It was painfully long, as though we would never reach our destination and instead we would simply just keep going and going and going forever.

At last, we arrived at our destination. We stepped out of the lift and into a large, cylindrical room with blue walls, red curtains, and a black and white checkered floor. There were sixteen stations (presumably one for each student), arranged in a circle, along with one large throne at the end of the room that faced opposite the entrance. The seat was taken up by Monokuma, who grinned at us as as he sat leisurely upon his throne.
Each station was labelled with a name, indicating for which student it was intended. We each went to our appropriate station so that they were all taken, save for one. The last one seemed empty until I saw the large picture of Hifumi that was propped up in a frame that occupied the space. The portrait had been crossed out in a dark red X.

"What took you so long?" complained Monokuma. "Did you guys stop for drive-thru on the way or something?"

Nobody answered.

"Hostile..." He laughed. "Puhuhuhuhuhuhuhuhu! Let's get this show on the road."

"Hold on." I held up my hand, wanting to clear up one thing. "Before we start, what is that for?" I pointed to the portrait of our fallen classmate.

"Funny you should ask. Well, just because the dead are no longer with us, doesn't mean that can't be with us in spirit. I felt that everyone should really participate! Now that we've got that out of the way, let's quickly go over one more time how this little dog and pony show will proceed. Firstly, I let you bastards discuss. Once you reach a verdict, you take a vote on the culprit. If you're correct, I punish the culprit. If you are wrong, I punish everybody else, and the culprit goes free. Capisce?"

Silent nods.

"Alright, well let's get this party started. Class is in session!"

We all looked around at each other.

"Before we formally start," began Makoto. "I would like to give the culprit a chance to turn themselves in. You know, you can still do the right thing."

It was admirable, but to no avail. The room was silent.

He sighed, and it could've been my imagination, but was he trembling? "I figured I should try."

"Enough with this cheesy crap!" piped up Monokuma. "Let’s start with the murder weapon. Discuss."

So it began.

"Well, that's easy. The murder weapon was the knife," said Junko, getting our debate rolling.

"Taken from the kitchen," added Sakura. "You can tell by looking at the handle."

So far it wasn't anything that couldn't be easily figured out.

"Hmmm... That makes sense. There did seem to be a knife missing from the kitchen," said Chihiro.

"So then it's settled? Look's like that's the murder weapon for sure—" began Junko.

"You've got that wrong!"

It was Makoto, his voice surprisingly clear and strong. Privately, I was more than a little taken back by his boldness, but I—as well as the others—waited expectantly to hear what he had to say.

“Excuse me?” asked Junko, giving him a dirty look for cutting her off.
"Hang on, Makoto, are you saying Junko here is wrong?" asked Hiro.

"It's kind of difficult to contradict the knife blade sticking out of Hifumi's chest," said Junko as she folded her arms—sounding more than a little put out.

I knew I could back him up if he needed support, but instead I waited to see if he would correct his course.

"Exactly!" said Taka. "And there were no other weapons found at the scene of the crime!"

"Well, no, that's not actually the problem," said Makoto, shrinking back oh-so-slightly beneath Junko’s piercing glare, back to his usual self. "It's just that Hifumi also suffered a blow to the head."

*There we go.*

"Wait, what?" asked Junko.

"Yeah, what are you on about?" asked Mondo.

I explained. "Upon inspection of the body, you can see bruising along with an open gash on the crown of the skull."

"It’s also stated in the Monokuma File, for those of us who bothered to read it," said Byakuya.

"Lay off, I was guarding the scene, alright?" grumbled Mondo.

Sakura nodded. "As was I. Those of us who are watching guard have to put our faith in the rest to catch the culprit. Understand the risk we are taking and have patience."

"Anyway, what's this guy driving at?" asked Leon.

"Yeah, what gives?" asked Junko. "So what if there was bruising?"

Byakuya rolled his eyes, his smug aura palpable. "Do I have to spell everything out for you? Two different forms of injuries—"

"Which means there's definitely got to be a second weapon involved in the attack," said Makoto.

"I wasn’t finished, but yes, Makoto is correct."

I chimed in, coming to Makoto's aid. "Especially probable considering the fact that a trophy is missing from the trophy room. The one right outside the gym. Right, Celeste?" I turned to look at her.

"Hmmm?" She blinked, looking up with wide eyes as if surprised at having been reeled into the conversation. "Oh yes, of course. I was in the trophy room during the investigation, I can confirm. There’s a rather large one that appears to have been broken at the base."

"Are you saying a trophy was used as the murder weapon?" asked Sakura.

Before I could answer, Sayaka spoke.

"But if the knife and the trophy are involved how can we be sure which one is the murder weapon?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Leon. "I mean, it’s not like we can tell which part of the attack came first, right?"
“Does it really matter which came first?” asked Hina. “I mean, if he was attacked with two different weapons, does the order really make a difference?”

I decided to speak. “It could make all the difference.” I had a hunch, but I was hesitant to voice it just yet. I needed more information. The others looked at me quizzically.

“But I guess we’ll never know,” said Chihiro, looking sadly at the floor.

I shook my head. “Actually, the Monokuma File specifically states that the victim died from a blow to the head. So we know that much.”

“Aha!” cried Taka. “I see! So what you are saying, is the knife was the initial weapon used to attack, but the final killing blow must’ve been delivered by that second weapon!”

“That’s gotta be it!” said Hina.

“Wait.” I held up a hand. “Let’s hold off on any conclusions for now. We should consider all possibilities before making hasty decisions.”

“But the Monokuma File—” began Leon.

To my surprise, Makoto interrupted him. “No, I agree with Mukuro.” He looked deep in thought. “Something about this seems off.”

I wondered if we were thinking the same thing.


Makoto frowned. “I—I’m not sure. Mukuro?” he asked, looking to me.

“Well…” I tried to put in a way I felt the others could catch on. I knew from experience that I would persuade no one if I out and stated all my conclusions right off the bat. People need to come to their own conclusions, they don’t need to be led. “Consider this, is there something peculiar about the state of the murder weapon?”

“The state of the weapon?” He pondered for a moment. “Oh! It’s missing, is that what you’re talking about?”

“Precisely.”

“Huh?” asked Hiro. “But we still have the knife.”

“G-god, you’re dense!” cried Toko. “W-we already established the knife is not what k-killed Hifumi!”

“Hey!—“ he began to retaliate, but Sayaka interrupted him.

“No, Hiro has a point. I’m confused, too.” She frowned. "Why would the killer bother dispensing of one murder weapon but not the other?”

“See!” said Hiro. “I knew there was something fishy…” He gasped, pointing a finger in a moment of realization. “A plant!”

“Ugh, he’s lost it completely…” said Junko.

Several of the others tutted in disappointment, but I waited to see if there really was water to his
supposed epiphany.

“No! Not, like, the sentient vegetation that will eventually rise against us,” he began, and I admit he almost lost me for a second, but he added, “a plant. You know, a fake, a decoy.”

“So, you mean like a bluff?” asked Celeste. “To put it in your language. To hide one’s true intentions.”

“Exactly like a bluff,” I said, looking to Hiro. As our eyes met, I shot him a small assuring smile.

“So what you’re saying is that the knife was purposefully left behind to trick the rest of us?” asked Byakuya. “An interesting hypothesis, but to what end?”

“A few different possibilities, but whichever is the case, I think it’s a real possibility that the culprit has something to hide. For instance, when we realized the killing blow was the strike to the head, we made a pretty big assumption based on what we thought we knew.”

“Assumption?” asked Sakura.

“You mean the assumption that the knife was the first attack and the other weapon, the trophy, was the final blow? Based on the information given from the Monokuma File?” asked Makoto.

I nodded. “However, if we consider what Hiro just said, don’t you think it’s possible we need to think about it the other way around?”

“Mukuro, are you suggesting the trophy was the first attack?”

Hina spoke. “But the Monokuma File—“

“Think about it. If the true murder weapon is hidden, that must mean the culprit doesn’t want us to see it or know about it at all. If the knife was really used in the attack, why not take it as well? Makoto,” I implored. “When did the knife come into play?”

He thought about it. “After Hifumi was dead, right? That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “I propose that the missing murder weapon isn’t just the first weapon used in Hifumi Yamada’s murder, it was the only weapon used.”

“Interesting,” said Celeste. ”Perhaps the killer did not realize that the information would be available to us in a helpful file,” She smiled that eerie smile of hers. ”After all, they are our very first culprit.”

“Interesting indeed,” said Byakuya.


Hiro sighed. “Everyone is always so surprised…”

“I mean, yeah, I think you guys are talking sense,” said Mondo, “but that still doesn’t explain everything.”

“An oversight!” said Taka. “You must elaborate.”

Mondo nodded, but Byakuya answered for him.

“Naturally, what the killer would have to gain from presenting us with a decoy. Isn’t that right, Makoto?”
“Uh.” He sputtered a bit, taken aback by Byakuya’s acknowledgement. “Y-yeah. If the true murder weapon is gone, the culprit must have something to hide, right?”

“Vague, but adequate.” He seemed even more disappointed than usual.

“Unfortunately, we do not have our hands on such murder weapon—“ said Celeste, which I saw as my opportunity to jump in.

“So then we’ll have to make do with the information we do have. Don’t you all agree?”

She looked at me. “Such as?”

“Well, the knife, for instance.”

Makoto spoke. “Mukuro is right. It clearly comes from the kitchen, so is there anyone who noticed it go missing at any point?”

“If I may?” said Chihiro, raising a small hand.

“Chihiro, speak with confidence so the rest of us may hear what you have to say!” said Taka, a little too loudly.

“Oh, um,” began Chihiro, but upon hearing Taka’s words she tried her best to raise her voice, “I mean, what I meant to say was that I was in the dining hall sometime in the evening, before our observed Night Time hours. From what I remember, the knife was definitely there when I first entered the kitchen.”

“From what you remember?” asked Byakuya with a scoff.

“I-I’m sorry—“ began Chihiro, but she was cut off by Leon.

“Hey, drop it will you?” he said, glaring at Byakuya. “She’s doing her best!”

“How can we expect to trust her testimony if she doesn’t even trust her own memory?”

“Chihiro,” began Sayaka, “are you sure that’s what you saw?” Her coaxing nature seemed to have a more reassuring effect on Chihiro than either of the boys. Chihiro had been close to tears, but she took a deep breath to calm herself.

“I’m pretty sure….” said Chihiro. She shook her head. “No! I’m absolutely sure! However—”

“Yes?” asked Sayaka.

“The second time I returned to the kitchen, the knife was gone.”

“Are you sure?”

Chihiro nodded.

“And what was the span of time in between?” asked Sayaka.

“Maybe 10 minutes.”

“Is there anyone else who can attest to this?” asked Celeste. “While I’d like to believe you, I would feel much better if we had a corroborating witness.”
Mondo raised a hand. “Aye. I was with Chihiro in the dining hall the whole time. Man’s word of honor."

“Ok, so these two are in the clear,” said Leon.

“W-wait a sec!” It was Toko. “H-how do we know that these t-two aren’t in on something together?”

“What?” asked Chihiro, eyes going wide.

“Yeah!” said Hina. “For all we know, you guys could be conspiring together!”

“Hey! What the hell are you playin’ at?” demanded Mondo. “Don’t go accusing us of anything, we’re just telling you what we saw!”

“Awfully defensive,” said Byakuya. “However, that does bring up a problem I would like to clear up.” He turned to Monokuma. “You. Bear.”

“Hm?” Monokuma held up a paw, tilting his head curiously. “Is my beautiful voice required?”

Byakuya ignored this. ”Can the culprit have an accomplice?”

“Oh, sure! However, only the culprit, a.k.a. the one who commits the actual murder, can graduate. In other words—"

Kyoko finished his sentence. “A culprit can have an accomplice, but only the culprit would benefit from the crime. Therefore, the accomplice would have little to no incentive to tag along.”

“Bingo!” said Monokuma with a laugh.

“There, are you happy?” said Mondo, “You got your answer, we ain’t suspects.”

"Fortunately for the two of you," said Byakuya. "Your alibis check out just fine."

“Well, if it wasn’t you two, then who was it?” asked Sayaka. “If you have anything else to add, it will only do more to clear you guys as suspects. Try to remember,” she implored earnestly, “Did anyone else enter the dining hall during this time?”

Mondo frowned, brow furrowed as he scratched the back of his head. “Well, yeah. One person. But…” He looked to Chihiro.

“It was Hifumi.”

Silence. Chihiro continued.

“At the time, we didn’t think anything of it, but in retrospect, he—he was acting rather odd.”

“Odd?” asked Sakura sharply. "In what way?"

“Like, acting super shifty, y’know?” said Mondo.

“I asked him if he wanted to join us,” said Chihiro, “but he refused.”

“Seemed to be in a real hurry to get out of there,” said Mondo. "Guess now we know why."

“But if Hifumi was the one to grab the knife,” said Sayaka, “that doesn’t explain…"
“How he ends up dead on his dorm room floor?” asked Junko, finishing her trail of thought. I cringed at her more crass choice of wording, as did a few of the others, but nevertheless her point remained. She shrugged. “Beats me.”

“Listen, all we know is that before he showed up, the knife was still there, and after he left, it was gone.” Mondo shrugged.

“I got it!” said Taka. “He was using the knife to defend himself!”

“Or perhaps…” I began.

“Perhaps?” asked Makoto.

Kyoko finished my sentiment for me. “Perhaps we need to consider the possibility that Hifumi was more than a victim of circumstance.”

I nodded.

"Kyoko, are you suggesting…” Makoto seemed too fearful of the words to even say them, so instead Byakuya took over.

“—That Hifumi grabbed the knife in hopes of using it to kill another student?” he asked. “That seems to be the gist of it.”

She looked away, arms folded as she seemed to stare at nothing. “Well. It’s just a theory.”

“I… wouldn’t consider it off the table,” I said slowly. When I received some questioning looks, I added, “if we consider the possibility that Hifumi wasn’t expecting his attacker to fight back, let alone defeat him, I think it makes a lot of sense.”

Makoto jumped in. “So the killer was responding in self-defense?”

I hesitated. “I suppose it’s possible, but that doesn’t explain the wounds.”

“Wounds?” asked Makoto.

“If we follow this logic, the knife was used to attack the culprit, but not utilized in the response attack.” I continued, “According to my analysis of the body, Hifumi did indeed sustain not just one, but actually several blows to the head with a blunt object.”

“Strange.”

To my surprise, it was Kyoko. She looked intense, as though deep in thought.

“Sorry, why do you say that?” I asked.

She shook her head, not looking up at the rest of us. “Never mind. Not strange exactly. Just... The fact that you say it was definitely several blows to the head. You are certain?”

I nodded. “Positive.”

She responded with a slight nod in return. “Multiple attacks are a sign that the attacker wasn’t just aiming to injure…” Her eyes met mine, and it was as if I knew what she was about to say before she said it. “They were aiming to kill.”

A shiver ran down my spine. Indeed, that had been the conclusion I had drawn as well, but hearing it
aloud, I was struck by the direness of our situation.

“And what exactly is strange about that?” Byakuya spoke again, same condescending tone as usual. “It’s a game in which we must kill to survive, the culprit must’ve known this when they went for the weakling Hifumi.”

“Hey, cut it out!” said Hina in indignation, hair almost seeming to stand up in her anger. “Have some respect, will you?” There were tears welling up in her eyes.

“I agree with Hina,” said Celeste coolly, “The poor boy is dead. Have you no sense of decorum?”

“Very well, if you’re going to ignore the fact that Hifumi brought this upon himself, then by all means please keep living in your fantasy land where we all hold hands and sing kumbaya,” said Byakuya.

Hina shook her head. “You make me sick.”

I ignored their quibbling, too deep in thought going over all the facts of the case. There was a contradiction in there somewhere that was gnawing at me. My guess was that if Kyoko was correct, Hifumi saw his obligation as the janitor as an opportunity to dispose of any evidence that would give away his crime. However, if this was the case, his plan had clearly backfired. I wasn’t sure if the culprit knew of his janitorial duties, but the keys definitely were not on his person when I searched him. So… why the sloppy cleanup trail?

“Hello, Earth-to-Mukuro?” said Junko, her voice bringing me back to reality. “You still there? Give us something to work with, Ultimate Detective.”

“R-right. Of course, Sis.” My sister needed me, I had to give them something. I coughed, clearing my throat. I had a hunch, I decided seeing it through might help me get somewhere. “Uh… the sloppy cleanup. Let’s start there.”

“Huh?” asked Hina.

“The cleanup on the evidence. The culprit left all sorts of clues.” If my hunch was right, the clues were in reality a dead end, but I hoped by talking it through I could possibly make more sense of it—or even get the culprit to slip up and reveal more.

“Look, you’re my sister and you know I love you because I have to, but can you cool it with this whole cryptic crap?” Junko frowned at me.

“Well, if certain individuals had actually applied themselves to the investigation, they might actually know what Mukuro is talking about. It’s not rocket science,” said Byakuya.

“Fuck off four-eyes, no one asked you.”

Byakuya’s ears turned red, but before he could even respond, Makoto interjected loudly. “O-kay! Before that escalates…” He turned to me. “You’re talking about the trash room, aren’t you?”

I nodded.

He continued. “The furnace had been left on, but the gate was still locked.”

“So?” asked Junko.

“Yeah, maybe someone just forgot to turn it off,” suggested Hina.
Taka spoke, “Incorrect! I had gone with Makoto who had just received the key to use incinerator the day prior. If it was left on, I definitely would’ve noticed. Therefore, it is most likely that the furnace was left on at some point last night!”

“Ok, sure, but what does any of this have to do with a… sloppy cleanup trail?” asked Leon.

“On its own, the furnace isn’t all that suspicious,” admitted Makoto. “However, that wasn’t the only strange thing about the trash room, was it, Mukuro?”

“Makoto is correct,” I said with an affirming nod and a confident smile.

“Christ, those two are just birds of a feather, aren’t they?” I heard Leon mutter.

“Sure it isn’t more like a hive-mind?” asked Hiro.

I blushed, trying my best to ignore this as I continued. “Anyway, as I was saying—“

Celeste interrupted. “You are referring to my crystal ball, yes?”

“Sorry?” I asked.

“The additional evidence in the trash room. It’s my crystal ball, is it not?”

“Well, yes—“

Hiro gasped. “You mean the one you lent to me? I was looking all over for that thing!”

“It was found broken beside the incinerator this morning,” said Byakuya.

“But, wait, aren’t those things supposed to be, like, unbreakable?” asked Hiro.

“Are you sure you’re not thinking of diamonds?” asked Hina. She rolled her eyes.

“For the record, it is made of glass,” said Celeste, ignoring Hina and Hiro and addressing the rest of the students. “As I explained to Miss Mukuro, it is nothing more than a prop. I have spares.”

“So... you’re a con-artist?” asked Leon.

“I never said that!” she snapped. Once she regained her composure, she added, “It is just... difficult to convince my clients to believe in my clairvoyance without the pageantry to go with it. Would they be nearly as impressed if I read their fortunes from a small scrap of paper inside a fortune cookie? My gifts cannot be translated to the physical world, so crystal balls, tarot cards, the lot, it gives them something substantive to put their faith in. I am simply giving them the showmanship they desire.”


“That aside, we have to face the fact that Celeste’s crystal ball was found in the trash room, along with the burnt scrap of a white shirt,” said Makoto.

“But that could be anybody’s!” said Hina.

“Indeed,” said Sakura, much more calmly than Hina, possibly trying to level her energy. “There are numerous individuals among us who I am sure possess white shirts.”

“True,” said Makoto, “But the important part is that the shirt indicates that the culprit was hasty in their attempt to discard evidence. Or alternatively they were in a position where they couldn’t get rid
“So, the crystal ball implicates either Hiro or Celeste, correct?” asked Taka. “Since Celeste is the owner, and Hiro was borrowing it.” He pointed an accusatory finger. “Either one of you, explain yourselves!”

“That’s right!” said Hina, banging one fist on the little stand in front of her station. “You’ve got a lot to answer for!”

Hmm...

“Not necessarily,” I said, finally deciding to speak again. “Hiro fully admits to losing said crystal ball, don’t you Hiro?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said with a sheepish grin. “Whaddaya say, Celeste? No hard feelings?”

She sighed. “It is in the past.” However, she didn’t strike me as the type to easily let things go. Hiro also looked uneasy.

“Anyway,” I said, “this means the ball was not in either person’s possession the night of the crime. The culprit could’ve easily stumbled upon it at random.”

“Celeste did admit to having spares…” said Sayaka.

“True,” I said, “but before we make any hasty conclusions, consider how the crystal ball was being used.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sayaka.

“Come on,” I said. “Think.”

For a moment, everyone stood in silent befuddlement before Junko finally exclaimed in annoyance.

“For fuck’s sake! The ball was used to turn on the switch for the incinerator! There’s your answer, did everyone get that? Now can we please move on with this?”

I was surprised. “Actually, yes, Junko, that is correct.”

She smirked. “I have my moments. I’ll admit, I’m feeling pretty smug right now, it’s pretty nice. Is this how Byakuya must feel all the time?”

He frowned but didn’t respond.

Makoto spoke. “Well, if Junko is correct, the culprit would have to be able to hit a very small target from a great distance away. And all through a small hole in the metal grate…”

“And there’s only one person here with skill set to accomplish such a feat… Isn’t that right, Hina?”

I grinned triumphantly.

All eyes turned to Aoi Asahina, and she paled instantly. “No! That’s—that’s crazy! There’s gotta be a mistake, nobody could hit a target that small!”

“Perhaps this is true for the average person, yes,” said Celeste, “but you are no average person, are you? To the Ultimate Softball Star, hitting that switch must’ve been a walk in the park.”
“You’re wrong!” She was shouting now, hair once again standing up in her anger. “You’re making a mistake!”

“The only mistake here is the slapdash amateur job you did to hide your involvement,” said Byakuya. “In fact, I think Hifumi’s dying message points right to you.”

“D-dying message?” asked Toko. Several of the others also exclaimed in surprise.

… But strangely, Hina was not one of them.

“What? There’s a dying message?” asked Kyoko, for once seeming legitimately shaken rather than her usual calm and collected self.

“Yes, written in his own blood, no less,” said Byakuya. “The letters on the wall behind him clearly spell a-o-i, which can only be your first name, Aoi.”

When she didn’t respond, he continued.

“I’ve been suspicious of her since the trial began.”

“Hmm… I agree, her behavior has been rather strange,” I said. “Hasty to jump to conclusions, placing blame, possibly to avoid suspicion.”

“Because she feared the evidence would implicate her,” said Byakuya. “Am I wrong?”

Hina took a step back, eyes wide in horror. She looked completely backed into a corner. “I…” It was so faint I could barely hear her.

“It’s true then, isn’t it, Hina?” asked Makoto, his eyes sad. “I didn’t want to believe it, but…”

“It was me.” Hina didn’t look up, and instead hung her head sadly. “I’m sorry I didn’t say so straight away. I was just scared, you know? I didn’t know what to do.”

I didn’t say anything. We were finally getting a confession, after all. But something about this seemed off.

“I needed to use the incinerator last night. I guess Hifumi saw this as his opportunity to strike, so he came at me with the knife, and I guess he hadn’t counted on… m-my ability to fight back, and so I managed to disarm him and stab him with his own weapon. I was only protecting myself, you gotta understand!”

“But what about the strike to the head?” asked Kyoko.

“He… he hit his head against the wall. When I disarmed him, I guess he’d lost his balance, and he hurt himself.”

Her testimony didn’t line up with the sequence of events I’d put together at all. It didn’t even match with the Monokuma File, but everyone seemed completely convinced.

“Well, I suppose it’s settled then. Isn’t it, Mukuro?” said Kyoko, looking right up at me as she said it. Perhaps it was my imagination, but she seemed to be testing me, as though daring me to find a contradiction. I had no idea whether this meant she believed in Hina’s innocence or not.

“It’s done,” said Hina. “Go ahead and cast your votes. I—”

“Wait!”
My voice reverberated throughout the courtroom. My eyes had squeezed shut, and when I opened them again, I could see everyone else in the room staring right at me.

“Huh? What is going on?” Monokuma looked over at me curiously.

“Y-yeah,” said Hina. “I thought we already agreed it was me. You got a confession and everything! Drawing it out like this is only making it... making it harder for me.”

“I-I just think there are some inconsistencies between your testimony of the events and some of the basic facts of the case.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Hina, practically shouting so that it was no longer a question. “I did it! It was me! You have the proof!”

“Very well, Mukuro,” said Byakuya, ignoring Hina’s protests. To my surprise he was smiling. It was the same smug smirk as usual, but all the same, I couldn’t believe he was letting me speak. He had seemed so intent on proving Hina's guilt. “Where would you like to start?”

“Uh…” For once I was unprepared. “The… the dying message!” I just remembered something strange about it that I hadn’t been able to piece together until just now.

“What about it?” asked Hina indignantly. “What other meaning could the letters a-o-i possibly have?”

“She’s right, Mukuro,” said Makoto. “And we already have a confession.”

“I just think there’s far too many strange things about it,” I said. “For instance, the way the name is facing.”

“Yeah? What’s so strange about it?” asked Hina.

“Well, if we’re assuming Hifumi wrote the name with his finger, back facing toward the wall—”

Toko interrupted me. “Th-then it should’ve been upside-down, r-right?” she asked, although from her tone it sounded like she wasn’t even sure of her own conclusion. “U-upside-down and backwards.”

“Toko is correct,” said Byakuya. She blushed, mumbling something to herself as she looked down at her own hands. “What’s more—”

“Besides,” said Kyoko. “In case no one else has noticed, Hifumi is also not the sort of person who refers to people by their first name.”

“She’s right,” mused Leon. “Dude’s a full name kinda guy. I distinctly remember—”

“—Being referred to as Mister Leon Kuwata on more than one occasion,” Sayaka finished for him. “Right?”

He nodded, looking slightly perturbed.

“Sorry, just intuition.”

Kyoko nodded at the both of them.

“Maybe he just put in the effort to write it correctly so he could be absolutely sure his message was received,” suggested Taka.
“But Taka,” I said, “I examined the body, and his hands were clean. There was no blood on his finger.”

Someone cleared their throat, and we all looked over to see Byakuya glowering at the rest of us for having the audacity to interrupt him. “As I was saying,” he said, “The definitive proof was in the Monokuma File all along.” He looked to Makoto.

“Oh, um..” Makoto opened up his handbook. “It says… ‘Hifumi Yamada died from a blow to the head with a large blunt object. His death was instantaneous. However, he sustained several additional blows to the head’.”

“See?” said Byakuya. “If Hifumi’s death was instantaneous, there is no way he would have been alive long enough to write that dying message himself.” He pointed a finger at Hina. “All the clues up to this point have been a lie. Miss Asahina here, is being framed.”

“You’re wrong! You’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong!” cried Hina. She was practically screaming, her hands balled up into fists at her sides. “It was me! It had to be me! Listen to me! You—you’re going to get us all killed!” she said, but I could’ve sworn I heard her hesitate. “Nobody else could’ve been able to get into the incinerator room to burn the shirt!”

“I go to the trouble of proving your innocence,” said Byakuya, “And that is all you have to say? What do you gain from keeping up this charade?”

Seeing Hina’s reaction to Byakuya’s theory, I knew something wasn’t quite lining up. While I agreed with Byakuya’s premise, there was just one part of his statement with which I took issue. If she was being framed, why was she trying so hard to implicate herself?

“This is intolerable,” said Byakuya, sneering in disdain at Hina’s continued protests. “I see no need to provide more evidence myself, but Makoto, since you clearly know the answer, please inform the class.”

“I do?” asked Makoto.

“You should, since you’re the one who told me. Before the trial.” Byakuya sighed. “Still can’t keep up, I see. The victim, Makoto. The choice in victim is the clue.”

Of course!

“W-what on earth is so special about Hifumi?” asked Toko.

“Hifumi is—” I began, but I didn’t get an opportunity to finish.

“I was clearly talking to Makoto,” He snapped. "I’m through with you. I’d hoped that at the very least our Ultimate Detective would be willing to liven up our game, but you’re just as disappointingly dull as the rest.” For a moment, his gaze met mine and he seemed to challenge me, until he finally looked away with bored disinterest.

I flushed red, fists clenched in anger and embarrassment. Instead of answering to him, I turned to Makoto. “Makoto,” I demanded. "Monokuma gave you the key to the incinerator, didn’t he?”

“Oh! Y-yes, he did.”

“And you gave the key to Hifumi?”
“Yes,” he said again, nodding. “He was the first one in the rotation to receive the job as janitor.”

I nodded. “That, I believe, is your answer, Byakuya.” I stood defiantly. “Isn’t it? Makoto told us both that he gave Hifumi the key to the incinerator. You’re assuming that the killer chose Hifumi because of his status as the janitor.”

“Hmph.”

“But Mukuro, we went over this before the trial even started,” said Makoto. “‘Kill the janitor, and you can burn any evidence that you need to’, that is what you said.”

“And yet she felt no need to disclose this relevant information,” said Byakuya. “Wasting our time with inane baseball theories.”

“I agree,” said Sakura, “This does seem like crucial information.”

I gritted my teeth, scowling at Byakuya as I said, “I was waiting for it to be relevant to the discussion. I didn’t think we’d get a confession prior.”

“But I thought that we established that Hifumi was the attacker in this situation?” asked Sayaka.

“Reverse the logic, and it still works, I suppose,” said Celeste. “Perhaps Hifumi saw his janitorial duties as the perfect opportunity to dispose of evidence.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“You—you don’t know what you’re talking about!” said Hina. Tears were streaming from her eyes. “It was me! I didn’t know that Hifumi was the janitor.”

“But in your testimony, you said the reason you were with him is because you were going to the trash room together,” said Chihiro.

“I was lying! I didn’t know, I swear!”

“Well,” I said, “it’s possible, but when I did a full search of Hifumi’s body, the keys definitely were not on his person.”

“What?”

Several of the others seemed to gasp audibly in shock, including Hina, Taka, and Makoto.

“You searched him?” asked Taka.

“It was necessary,” I said, wanting to keep it short. I was aware of the uncomfortable gazes on me, but I ignored them, still in thought.

“And furthermore,” said Kyoko, and I broke my reverie to pay attention to her, “Hina, I’d like to go back to your shaky testimony.”

At this point, Hina looked too shaken to speak just yet, but she nodded.

“Your testimony isn’t in line with the evidence. It contradicts Mukuro’s investigation of the body as well as the Monokuma File.”

“Which part?” asked Hina.
“You said that you stabbed Hifumi with the knife, yes?” asked Kyoko.

Hina nodded again, slowly this time, the beads of sweat visible on her forehead.

“But as we have established several times, the Monokuma File clearly states that Hifumi’s cause of death was not the knife. It was the blow to the head.”

“So?”

“Don’t be dense,” said Byakuya, impatient. “The stories don’t match up. You—”

“Hina!” I was too focused to even acknowledge Byakuya’s reaction to my interruption. My words tumbled out in a rush. “Hina, if Hifumi died from the blow to the head... Was that knife there to hide the true strength of the attacker?”

She shook her head adamantly. “You’re wrong. I’m telling you, you need to vote for me. If you vote for the wrong guy, the rest of you are going to die.” She sounded so convincing that despite all the contradicting evidence, a part of me wanted to believe her.

“All the evidence—” began Byakuya.

I was struck by an idea. I needed to ask her something.

“Hush,” I said to Byakuya, watching Hina intently. She was still as stubborn as ever, but her energy to continue protesting seemed to be losing steam.

“Did you just—”

I shushed him again, still not taking my eyes of Hina. “Hina?” My voice was careful.

“What?” She looked up at me and glared. It was a look I’d seen before, but never directed at me.

“Tell me something.”

“No.”

“Don’t be foolish, Hina. I already told you my theory. The trophy, just outside the gym, was screwed to the floor. The base was snapped. Are you strong enough to break that trophy? I just need a yes or no.”

She ignored me.

“If I’m wrong, you’re going to get us all killed. But I don’t think I am wrong.”

“I’m telling you, you’re wrong. It was me.”

“Hina, you’re not being framed, are you?” And even though I asked a question, there was an air of certainty to my voice. “You’re trying to protect someone else.”

She didn’t answer, instead was hunched over, her face in her hands. She seemed to be crying.

“Only someone really strong could break a trophy that size, and then swing it with enough power to kill someone,” I said. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

Silence from Hina. Instead, a different voice spoke.
“Hina.”

It was Sakura.

Hina, still ignoring my question, looked up at her, eyes red and still brimming with tears.

Sakura spoke again. “Hina. It is enough.” There was a note of finality in her tone that nobody dared question.

Hina stood up straight again. “Sakura?”

“It was a valiant effort, but the ruse is up.” This time addressing the entire group, she said, “I will no longer hide.”

“Sakura?” Makoto’s eyes were wide. “It was you?”

She nodded.

“Why?” asked Makoto.

“I-I thought I was protecting Hina.” she began. Sakura was putting on a brave face, but I didn’t miss how her voice seemed to waver for just a moment. “You were right, for the most part. He was going to attack. I saw Hifumi and Hina together and thought it seemed suspicious. Hina saw me, but Hifumi did not. I was outside the dining commons when he left. I saw him conceal the knife. I knew where they were going. So I grabbed the trophy, and I followed.” She frowned. “Hina is my friend. I thought I was saving her.”

“You did!” said Hina. “Sakura, you did, you saved me! You were just in time, Sakura. I thought I was dead for sure.”

Sakura shook her head. “I thought I was saving you, but really… I might have just been trying to save myself.”

Hina’s eyes went wide in shock and horror. “What do you—”

“The multiple strikes,” said Kyoko. “You didn’t hit him just once, right? It was multiple times.”

“He died instantly after the first strike,” said Sakura. “I knew it instantly. I should’ve been careful. And even when I knew, I could have stopped… But I didn’t just want to stop him. I… At the time my judgement was clouded, I was worried about Hina, and my gang, and myself, and my… my Kenshiro. My boyfriend, he is… he is in the hospital. He was involved in an accident, his condition is worsening, and it was my… I wish… When I first saw the video, I knew that was it was never my intention to expend any of your lives in order to see him again, but…” She bowed her head in shame, then looked up at the rest of us.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I allowed for Monokuma’s tricks to get to my head. I came to myself afterwards, and I tried to do the right thing. I told Hina that I was not going to hide. She insisted that she owed me, that she take the fall for me, but I refused. The case against me was too damning. It was never my intention to trick any of you. When I saw the body this morning, saw that the scene had been tampered with, I was as surprised as anybody else. It had been my intention to tell everyone in the morning, but after seeing that I actually stood a chance, I—I couldn’t bring myself to confess. Once again, I hope you’ll forgive me. I was foolish. This was the first trial, I didn’t know what was going to happen, all I knew was the possibility of facing punishment and I… I was scared.”

“If you want proof,” continued Sakura, “here it is.” She reached into her coat pocket, pulling out the
key to the incinerator room. “The trophy is hidden in my room, it was too large to burn. I realize it is not much in proving Hina’s innocence, but I’m just asking you guys… to believe in me.”

“Why are you doing this?” asked Hina. Her jaw was set in anger, but I could see she was still crying.

“I am done being a coward,” said Sakura, and the tired look on her face made her seem so much older. Still, she stood herself up straight to her tallest very tall height, as though mustering up the last of her dignity. “I’ve done a lot of wrong, Hina. Let me try to make it right. I will face my punishment like an honest woman.” She turned to Monokuma. “It is time.”

“Yessirree!” said Monokuma with a sick laugh. “Alright everyone! You all have a lever in front of you, so it’s time to cast your votes. Did you successfully catch the culprit?”

We all cast our votes, myself included, and once everyone had submitted the answer the results were sprawled across a jumbo screen:

“SAKURA OGAMI IS FOUND: GUILTY”.

Monokuma laughed again. “Looks like you guys were right after all! The culprit, the one who killed Hifumi Yamada, was none other than Sakura Ogami! Was it that rough and tough gang leader mentality that lead to her demise? Guess we’ll never know.” He seemed to take a moment to study the results of the verdict. “Hmm… Fascinating. Anyone game for a little fun fact?”

“Fuck you!” bellowed Mondo. “We’re done hearing anything from you!”

“That’s right!” said Junko. “We’re sick of your games.”

He wagged a single paw. “Ah-ah-ah. If only that were the case, but we’re only just getting started! Anyway, as I was about to say, interesting bit of trivia, but the vote was not unanimous! While the majority did indeed vote for Sakura, little Aoi Asahina here is the only one who voted for herself! Careful missy, too many mistakes and you just might strike out.” He laughed at his own joke.

“It’d be a more pleasant punishment than having to listen to you,” said Hina. In a much quieter voice, she added, “We don’t deserve to live.”

He fanned himself. “Puhuhuhu! That was so exciting! The scandal, the intrigue, the betrayal! I swear, my heart is still racing, I wasn’t sure if you guys were going to pull through!”

Makoto ignored him. “Sakura?” he asked, as though he still couldn’t believe it. Even after her confession, even after the results of the vote, he was still clinging onto some foolish false hope. “So it really was you?”

Her silence said more than any words of affirmation or denial.

“Disgusting really, that you would destroy yourselves over those mere relationships,” said Monokuma. “How deep is your despair?” He seemed to relish the word.

“You’re disgusting,” said Hina, and I could hear the unmitigated rage and contempt as she glared at Monokuma.

“Well, enough of the preamble, time to get this show on the road! Time for the culprit’s punishment! That’s what everyone is waiting for, after all.”

“Stop it! You—you can’t do this!” said Hina, pushed to the edge of hysteric. Her voice continuing to echo through the chamber made the sound unbearable “Stop! It’s not her fault! She was just—”
“Now then, I’ve prepared a very special punishment for Sakura Ogami, the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader!”

Sakura ignored him. Instead, she once again turned just to address Hina. “Hina,” she said, “even though it has been only been a short while, it has been a pleasure getting to know you. You seem like a wonderful girl. I am honored to be your friend.” She addressed Monokuma. “I am ready for my punishment.” Her smile was resolute.

But even in the strongest of us, I saw the flicker of fear in her eyes.

My stomach churned as Monokuma said the words:

“Let’s give it everything we’ve got! It’s punishment time!”

—

We weren’t sure what was going to happen, but the lights seemed to dim, and the temperature in the room dropped. Everyone eyed each other uneasily. Sakura remained resolute, but despite her stillness I could see her watching Monokuma out of the corner of her eye. And then…

Chains shot out from somewhere behind her, snaking around her neck, her torso, her arms, yanking her backward into another room we didn’t even know existed a moment prior. Sakura struggled against the chains, but to no avail. Her stoic exterior was shaken, replaced by a moment of wide-eyed open-mouthed shock. The scenery changed; we watched as Sakura was strapped to the seat of a huge motorcycle, the loud clanging of the chains echoing throughout the dark room, mixed with the clinking of a metal fence barrier as it rose from the ground, separating us from the victim.

For a moment, silence. Then, a row of beaming lights flickered on to reveal Sakura was on a motorcycle within what was really a long row of motorcycles, each boarded by a test dummy with Monokuma’s head. Although I was straining to see, I realized the beaming lights were actually headlights; each pair belonged to a row of cars parallel to the motorbikes.

Monokuma’s smile was ever present, and he pressed a large red button.

The crashes on each end began first. There was a loud blaring buzzer with each one, and the motorcycles and cars would race towards each other at impossible speeds, a booming crash as debris fell everywhere and the remains of the crash went up in in flames. Each motorcycle was decimated. The room was a mess of shattered glass and chunks of metal, the dummies completely lost in the twisted hunks of metal that were once cars and bikes. Smoke rose from the debris.

I could feel my heart pounding with each crash as the row got smaller and smaller, dwindling in numbers as we began to approach to the middle. Sakura remained as stoic as ever, but I could only imagine how she was feeling. The noise was deafening, my only thoughts were incredulity at how none of us were deaf yet, or injured by the flying debris. There was the scent of smoke and of gas in the air. The flames made the room impossibly hot, flickering and illuminating the scene making everything appear just that much more catastrophic.

There were only two motorbikes left. A detail I had missed before, but beside Sakura I realized the dummy on the bike was not a Monokuma doll, but instead the silhouette of a tall man. According to the lineup, he was supposed to be next. There was still the sound of the fires crackling, but in the relative silence, we could hear the sound of an engine rev. Then Monokuma pressed the button again. The silhouetted man raced ahead, crashing just like the others, and perhaps it was my imagination, but I could’ve sworn I caught Sakura wince.
This time, her motorcycle was the one to rev up. Time seemed to simultaneously slow down and speed up. Everything seemed to happen all at once. Tires screeched, and Sakura closed her eyes, seeming to brace herself as the bike raced onward but instead of facing the one of the cars from the identical line like we were expecting, a giant semi-truck emerged from the shadows, large headlights beaming, tired of a braked car screeching, and horn blaring louder than anything I’d ever heard, despite the fact that the driver seat appeared to be empty.

I squeezed my eyes shut at the last moment, unable to bear the look on Sakura’s face, but that didn’t stop me from hearing the sound of the vehicles colliding. Opening my eyes, I could see the flames of the wreckage, and I stared in transfixed horror. A hubcap rolled off, teetering to a stop at Monokuma’s feet, and his set grin and sinister glint in his eye was truly wicked enough to send me into despair.

Until that moment I had completely forgotten about my classmates, too mesmerized by the freakshow to look way. However, when I came to, I saw that everyone looked just as shaken as I felt. We didn’t so much return to the courtroom, rather the world around us seemed a blur, and it seemed more like the courtroom was returning to us.

... 

The remaining fourteen of us stood in horrified silence for what felt like an eternity. Monokuma, who had returned to his seat in the circle and seemingly impatient, was the first to break it.

“Don’t you all just feel so blessed? You get to witness your very first execution! Lucky you! Without Sakura’s confession, you guys all probably would’ve bitten dust.”

Hina had fallen to her knees, head in her hands as her body was wracked with sobs.

“What a disappointment,” I was surprised to hear Byakuya speak. He looked perhaps more shaken than usual, but all the same I was even more surprised to not only see him relatively unruffled by the disturbing events that had just played out, but still unrelenting in his condescension. “I had hoped our brief mix-up would at least make our game a little more interesting, but it really only made things more tedious in the long run.”

“What the hell are you on about?” asked Leon. His voice was higher than usual, face as white as a sheet.

“Yeah!” burst out Mondo, still visibly shaken. “That chick just died, can you fucking drop the bullshit for one goddamn second?”

“Need I remind you, Byakuya,” said Celeste, still far more calm and collected than the majority despite the slight quaver in her voice, “that you were the one who pointed out the supposed ‘dying message’ in the first place? You were just as fooled as the rest of us.”

“Do not associate me with the likes of you,” said Byakuya. “I solved this case light years before any of you morons had even come close.”

“Excuse me?” said Celeste, her cool composure dropping. For a moment, I could’ve sworn I heard her accent slip. She recuperated. “I mean, I beg your pardon?”

“I said the evidence pointed to Hina, I never once said I believed her to be the culprit.”

“What difference does it make?” asked Junko.

I spoke. My voice seemed hoarse from overuse, and possibly weak, but I was firm. “But you were
“And where exactly did I make my err?” Byakuya folded his arms, giving me the same patronizing look as always.

“The part about the evidence being fabricated to implicate Hina, that was right. But you made one mistake,” I said, and even though I knew I had him, there was no joy in the statement. Not even a sense of satisfaction. “You thought Hina was being framed.”

“Oh! Let me guess,” said Junko, and her voice was dripping with the usual sarcasm as she looked at Byakuya, but this time, it held much more malice and disgust than I was used to, “Is it because you couldn’t possibly understand the concept of someone intentionally trying to protect another? Does it not compute? Maybe if we caught a glimpse of what was between his ribs, we’d find a circuit board instead of a heart.”

He grit his teeth, fist clenched and for a moment, and for just a moment his usual haughty demeanor seemed to crack. Instead of responding to me or to Junko, he turned on Hina. “You. Why would you go through all the trouble of hiding the truth from the rest of us? Just to save a delinquent like her?”

Hina stopped crying, standing to her feet, but Byakuya seemed unruffled by her icy stare. All of a sudden, she seemed to wilt. “Because… I owed her. She saved my life.”

“But Hina,” said Sayaka. “Throwing away your own life and everyone else’s to save hers? What sense does that make?”

“Indeed,” said Celes, “You must have felt you owed her a life-debt. But I must admit, I do not see the point in repaying the favor for saving your life, if saving Sakura meant you would soon be dead after. It seems to make her sacrifice rather pointless, no?”

“I don’t care!” said Hina.

Taka seemed to recoil. “You—you would forfeit the lives of everyone in this room for one person?” His eyes were wide, his face pale, mouth agape in shock.

Monokuma cackled, baring a paw of sharpened claws. “How do you guys feel, knowing that Hina would so willingly trade in your lives for Sakura’s? Does it make you despair?”

“H-hina?” asked Chihiro, once again close to tears. “How could you?”

“W-what the h-hell is wrong with you?” screeched Toko.

“Puhuhuhu! Now that you know her true colors, whatever will you do with her now? The mystery continues…”

The despair seemed to drown out any remaining feelings of hope, but a voice rang clear throughout the room, cutting through the tense atmosphere like a knife.

“No!”

I turned to see Makoto staring angrily at Monokuma, his stance defiant.

“What’s this?” asked Monokuma.

“We will not turn against each other! You are the one to blame here! Hifumi, Sakura, Hina, they all did this because of your tricks! Well, we won’t fall for your manipulations anymore. This pain is all
your fault. You, and the mastermind alone. We won’t fall into despair!”

Makoto’s ever present sense of hope in all of the misery had an infectious effect. I felt emboldened by his bravery to stand up to our captor. “Makoto is right! I swear, the rest of us are going to make it out of this place alive.”

“Out?” asked Monokuma. “Why on earth would you want out?”

“Are you serious?” asked an incredulous Junko. “After what just happened, who could possibly want to stay?”

Monokuma giggled. “Oh, you will see. You’re smart. Well...” He reconsidered. "We have a handful of smart cookies in the bunch. If you guys figure out the mysteries of the school, I’m sure you’ll be converted in no time! Soon. Soon you will understand why you can never leave. In fact, I am confident you will be thankful for gracious ol’ me taking you under my wing.”

“We will never be thankful!” said Makoto. “You are the reason for all this misfortune!”

“Indeed!” yelled Taka. “This only proves that we must work together even harder to eliminate you! That is the only way we will succeed!”

I noticed several of the others looking around in confusion, but after a second they began to nod and murmur in agreement. Of course, Monokuma immediately took to squashing our hopes like how one might squash a pesky insect.

“You act like I’m the one singlehandedly taking you guys out one by one,” said Monokuma, shaking his head in disappointment. “Nope, nope, nope! I never forced Hifumi or Sakura to act. It’s just not my style! I’m merely bringing light to the true nature of humanity.”

“You’re the one who put us in this situation in the first place!” said Makoto.

“Agh, details, details,” said Monokuma, waving him off flippantly. “Look, I’m trying to help, ok? The sooner you stop resisting, the easier things will be. Once you unlock the mysteries of the school, you’ll understand.”

“Like hell we’ll stop resisting!” said Junko. “What is wrong with you?”

“Mysteries?” I asked, admittedly distracted. “What mysteries?”

“While we’re on the subject of mysteries,” said Kyoko. “Earlier, when you said ‘That’s what everyone is waiting for, after all’, what did you mean my that? When you say ‘everyone’... who exactly were you referring to?”

“Oops!” Monokuma snickered behind his hands. “Spoilers! Have I revealed too much?”

“Just shut up!” screamed Hina. “Shut up! No one wants to hear anything you have to say!”

“Oh, is Hina feeling the despair? Why so angry at me? After all, you were the one closest to her.” Monokuma mock gasped, a taunt that hid no true shock behind it. “And to hear Sakura admit that she would place her own relationships above the special bond you two had? To choose the loyalty of a boyfriend and some common criminals over you? Aren’t you just in agony?” He was gushing with delight, dripping with disgusting sweat and positively beaming. “The deeper the bond, the stronger the despair, that’s what I always say!”

“What nonsense are you spewing?” said Junko. “‘Special bonds?’”
“Well, for instance.” He gestured between myself and my sister. “Take you and your beloved sister, Mukuro, reunited at last! Nothing is more tragic than long lost family. If something were to, say… happen to one of you,” he said—and he seemed to look directly at Junko as he said it—“how deep would your despair go?” There was a wicked glint in Monokuma’s red eye.

“Shut up!” I screamed. My vision went red; I didn’t remember the last time I’d raised my voice like that. I didn’t know what I was aiming for, but I wasn’t thinking. I just knew that I would never let anyone threaten Junko.

Suddenly in a frenzy, I lunged at Monokuma. But—

“That’s enough.”

As angry as I was, Kyoko latched onto my arm without hesitation. Her grip was like iron, strong enough I was sure it would leave a bruise. Her voice was a low murmur. “Now is not the time. We must learn to pick our battles.”

Despite my anger, I stopped resisting, realizing that she had a point. My arms fell weakly to my side, in my moment of rage I hadn’t even been aware that they’d been balled into fists.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

She didn’t let go of my arm.

“Whoop! Look’s like a struck a nerve,” said Monokuma, and he was feigning his usual cheerful mood as he wagged what I imagine would’ve been a finger at me if he had fingers but instead was his entire paw. “Careful Mukuro, you almost violated a school rule. You know troublemakers have to be punished.” Once again he bared his claws. If a toy bear’s smile could seem forced, then it was definitely forced. “Guess I’d better go. Wouldn’t want to risk a little oopsy-daisy to happen again, would we? Besides, I gotta keep my image of mystery and intrigue somehow!”

He slunk back behind the chair on which he had been previously standing. We didn’t bother to stop him. We’d had enough. Slowly, one by one, the rest of us filtered out of the courtroom. Besides the clattering of footsteps, only remain noise was Hina, who had once again fallen to her knees and continued to quietly sob.

Chapter End Notes

As much as I’d like to think Sakura would never kill anyone, I’m going to go by different universe, different rules. I think we as a fandom collectively kind of forget Sakura’s fiercer, more competitive side because in the game she’s generally such a gentle lamb. But remember, she defeated her dad at 14, and her ultimate competition is her boyfriend! We just forget. The girl shows a lot of restraint. However, I feel like the darker aspects of her character would’ve been drawn out more if she was a biker delinquent. I’m sad she had to go first, she's honestly one of my favorite characters, but I hope I did her justice. (Oh the struggle of finding right balance of “said” and varying dialogue tags.)

Please don’t forget to comment! I hate asking, but I appreciate feedback. Also knowing which swaps you like helps me get a better feel of which characters to invest time in! Also, considering this is the first trial and execution, let me know your thoughts!
Chapter 2.1: Arriving Fashionably Late with Starbucks

Chapter Summary

Time for the students to explore the new floor!

Number of Students: 14/16

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient! Anyway, here's the update. It's a bit long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After the trial, we collectively returned to the dining hall in silence.

Makoto was the last to arrive. He had gone to check on Hifumi’s room.

“Well?” asked Junko once he returned.

We watched him warily.

“It’s… all gone,” said Makoto. “Everything. The room is spotless.”

“How unfortunate,” said Celeste with a heavy sigh. “But I suppose it is for the best. It would be better than leaving that mess to fester and rot.”

“Mess?” asked Junko. “How can you even say something like that? You—you’re—”

“Coping with the death of a classmate in the best way I can without being given the proper time to grieve?” asked Celeste, her open-mouth surprise seeming more mocking than genuine as she looked at Junko. “Adaptability is how you survive. This is how I chose to adapt. Hifumi was a tragic loss, yes, but he refused to adapt, and so met his demise. Sakura was wandering out at night despite our agreement, and was punished accordingly.” She said it so calmly. “This is what happens to those who refuse to adjust to life.” She glanced over at Hina—who had been sitting silently at one of the dining hall tables this whole time—but said nothing.

“Say whatever you like,” said Junko. “It doesn’t excuse the fact that you’re acting like a total piece of shit right now!”

“I see no point in tip-toeing around,” said Byakuya. “Those who cannot compete in the game will simply fall behind. That is the way it is.”

“But you can’t just say shit like that, you freak!” said Leon, glaring at Byakuya.

“Yeah,” said Junko. “It’s seriously fucked up! I don’t even know how you can even think any of this is okay!” Even Junko, as crass and vicious as she could be at times, knew Byakuya and Celeste has crossed some unspoken line. There was a time and place for everything, but I was pretty sure trash
talking the dead could be filed under the “inappropriate” category.

Celeste was unfazed. “I see,” she mused.

“See?” asked Junko. “See what?”

Celeste did not answer her question. “You will die.”

“What?” said Junko, as if daring her to continue.

“If you keep on like this,” said Celeste, red eyes staring intensely into Junko’s, “you will only continue to expose your weakness. You will certainly not survive. Do you understand?” Her patronizing tone was more than I could bear.

I grit my teeth, positively seething. “Well, I think making ominous threats directed at my sister will certainly not help your chances of surviving. Do you understand?” I didn’t care if it sounded bad. I didn’t care if in reality, I had no plans on killing anybody. Nobody was going to hurt Junko. Nobody.

“Mukuro!” cried Taka with a gasp. “You wouldn’t—”

“Try me.” My hands were clenched into tight fists.

Despite my anger, I couldn’t help but notice that Makoto, who usually was the one to intervene in times like these, was suspiciously silent.

I had no intention of attacking anyone, but as I lurched forward with no real plan in mind, Taka stepped in between me and Celeste, a couple of the other guys ready on the offense in case I tried anything, and once again I felt Kyoko’s deliberate gloved hand get a firm grip on my forearm.

“Enough! Two of our friends are dead,” said Hina, her voice surprisingly forceful despite the hoarse cracking. “We shouldn’t be fighting.”

All eyes turned to Hina. I had been forgotten for the moment by everyone—including Kyoko whose hand was still on my arm.

“Ah, so the s-snake s-s-s-speaks!” said Toko.

“Indeed,” said Byakuya, “and we are not friends. Surely you must realize that by now. After all, Hifumi did try to kill you. Even after all this are you still deluding yourself to think that we can hold hands and get along?”

“Oh, cut it out already!” snapped Junko, and I tell by her tone that she was done with everyone. She didn’t address the others, just Byakuya. “I think we’ve all done our very best to deal with your bullshit up to this point, Byakuya, but I think considering what we’ve had to go through we can draw the line. Here. Now.” She turned to Toko and Celeste. “And the last thing we need are more fucking comments from the peanut gallery. Hina is right. Two of our friends are dead, so if everyone could keep the snide remarks to a minimum just at the very least until tomorrow, and I’ve had at least a halfway decent night’s sleep that’d be a-ma-zing!” Her voice rose until it was shrill.

For a moment, no one spoke.

“Wow, Junko,” said Hiro, breaking the silence and mirroring the majority’s attitude of somehow being scared, surprised, and impressed all at once. “That was—”
“Ugh.” Junko huffed. “Don’t get used to it.”

“Very well,” said Byakuya. “I am through wasting my time. I see no point in continuing to humor my competitors when it leaves me nothing to gain.” He turned to leave. “Oh,” he added, “and don’t expect me to attending any more of frivolous joint breakfasts while she is still here,” he said, pointing to Hina. “Goodbye.”

I looked to Hina, as did some of the others.

“Hina, don’t—don’t listen to him,” said Sayaka, reaching out to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, but I didn’t miss the moment of hesitation. Even good-natured Sayaka was still wary around her. “You’re still welcome to join us. Right, guys?”

Silence.

Hiro sighed. “Uh, look,” he began. “Not that I don’t trust you, Hina, but…”

“Buuuut you don’t trust her,” said Junko flatly. “Is that it?” She rolled her eyes.

“Look! My gut is telling me to throw caution to the winds, all I know is that I’m not big on taking my chances.”

“What?” cried Junko. “What in fresh hell are you talking about? You’re a gambler!”

“That’s completely different!” said Hiro indignantly.

I certainly didn’t see how it was much different, and Junko didn’t look convinced either, but someone else spoke.

“She did attempt to forfeit everyone’s lives in order to save Sakura,” said Celeste. “Personally, that is not something I would take lightly.”

“Y-yeah!” said Toko. “Hina already tried t-to kill us once! Who kn-knows when she’ll try again!”

“How can you guys be so cruel?” asked Sayaka. “Can’t you see she’s taking all this hard enough as it is?”

“I dunno,” said Leon, “Sorry, Hina,” he added, but he seemed to be addressing Sayaka more than anything else. “I’m just sayin’! Maybe Glasses isn’t completely crazy.”

“Leon!” scolded Sayaka.

He ignored her. “Besides, did everyone miss how Mukuro just flipped out just now?” said Leon. He was smiling, trying to stay calm, but I didn’t miss how the corner of his eye and lip would twitch. “Any one of you could be up to something already!”

“Yeah, sorry,” said Hiro, “But I’m gonna fold for this round.” He held his hands up in resignation.

“Look, I’m cool with whatever the group decides to do about—” said Mondo, and instead of saying exactly who or what, he just nodded in Hina’s general direction, “but all I know is I’m not letting some chick scare me. I mean, c’mon, what’s she weigh, a buck? A buck-twenty?”

“Who said anything about scared?” said Leon, his voice cracking slightly despite his supposed toughness. He seemed uncomfortable with having caught Mondo’s attention. “I was just—”

Chihiro buried her face in her hands, and I could hear muffled sniffling noises.
“Oh dear,” said Sayaka, ignoring the fight between the boys. “Chihiro, what’s wrong?” She went over to her, reaching out a comforting hand.

Chihiro sniffed, looking up and shaking her head. “Sayaka and Junko are right!” said Chihiro, voice much louder and clearer than usual. “We shouldn’t be fighting! We—we’ve already lost so much.” She was right back to the tears.

“Listen to Chihiro!” said Taka. “Fighting amongst ourselves is exactly what the mastermind wants!”

“I-I just don’t think I could take it if anyone else were to… were to….” stuttered Chihiro, as if she were afraid of her own words.

“Guys, forget it,” said Hina. “If you don’t want me around, I can take a hint. Ok?” She stood up, but before leaving she turned to Makoto. “Hey, Makoto.”

“Huh?” He looked up at her, eyes dazed as though his mind was somewhere else. Hina’s inquiry finally brought him back to reality.

“Sorry, Makoto. I know you were kinda big on the whole group breakfast thing, but if my being there is gonna have people at each other’s throats, I’d rather just… take one for the team, you know?” She laughed weakly, scratching the back of her head, but I could tell it was forced.

For just a moment, she turned back to look at us before heading out.

“In that case,” said Celeste. “I am turning in as well.” She spoke through a stifled yawn. “I shall see you all in the morning, granted Hina keeps to her word, of course.” She smiled and departed.

“It’s probably best if we all head back, to be honest,” said Sayaka, frowning. “I think we could all do with some sleep.”

“I-If you say so,” said Chihiro.

“Absolutely,” said Taka, but his conviction didn’t sound nearly as strong as usual. “We—we must do our best to maximize time for sleep. Recovery is of utmost importance.”

The others said their goodbyes and headed off to bed, where only a handful of us remained.

I was still watching Makoto. He looked completely broken.

“Hey, Makoto?” asked Sayaka. “Are you alright?”

“What? Oh, yes, I am… no,” he admitted, hanging his head. “So many of our friends, gone. I assigned Hifumi janitor duty. If only I had been more attentive! It’s my—”

“Stop it.”

I heard Kyoko’s commanding voice beside me at once. I hadn’t even realized when she had let go of me, but I was once again able to move my arm.

“Huh?” Makoto looked up at her. “Kyoko? What are you—”

“You seemed about to blame yourself is all. It’s a heavy burden to bear the responsibility of others,” said Kyoko. “You said it yourself, did you not? Only the mastermind is the blame for our situation.”

He still didn't look completely convinced, but he said, “I-I guess you’re right.”
“That’s right, Makoto!” said Sayaka. “You can’t worry your head off too much. Things won’t be this way forever.” She gave him her best smile, back to her beautiful and poised self. It seemed at odds with the gloomy atmosphere.

“And I know you can be strong,” I said. “You’re the kind of person who can overcome the deaths of your classmates.”

I was speaking from experience at least a little bit. Sometimes, the only way to overcome tragedy is to just move on. It was the way of life. If I allowed myself to get emotional with every tragic case I solved, I would never discover the truth. And for a detective, the truth is what truly mattered.

He shook his head.

“Huh?” I was perplexed.

“I—I can’t do that!” said Makoto. I was surprised by his intensity. “Mukuro, I can’t forget about my friends! I can’t turn away from their deaths. I’m going to keep them with me.”

I was surprised. “I see,” I mused. “Very well, you’ve chosen the harder path. I, um… I didn’t expect…” I shook my head. “Well, nevermind.” I didn’t understand him. Still, I was impressed. The boy showed strength. It was the sort of strength I had given up on with my profession.

Perhaps Makoto was stronger than myself.

Junko interrupted my reverie. “‘Kuro, I think we’d better go.”

“Huh?” I was brought back to reality. “Oh yes, you’re right.” I nodded a small bow of goodbye to my remaining classmates. “It is getting late. Junko and I will be turning in.”

“Breakfast, tomorrow!” said Sayaka. “We’ll be expecting you.”

I managed a small smile. “Of course.”

“Alright, sis,” said Junko, tugging me along, and there was a surprising note of urgency.

The dorms to Junko’s room and my room were just beside each other. Junko halted to a stop just outside her door.

“What are you doing?” asked Junko, her posture one of confrontation, hands on her hips.

“What?” I blinked, taken aback.

“Why did you flip out like that?” she demanded. “Earlier, when Celeste said all that creepy shit.”

“I—I wasn’t going to let anyone say that to you!” I was baffled that I even needed to explain this to her. Just the thought of it still made me furious.

“Miss Queen of the Undead says weird shit all the time! You know what you do about it? You nod along because she’s weird as hell and you move on! You can’t do stuff like that!”

“I was trying to protect you! I’m your big sister, that’s my job.”

“You can’t freak out on people! Even Leon thought it was suspect, and we all know the only thing in his head are piles of sawdust and stray cobwebs. Besides, even if you’re cool, they don’t know that. The others will freak and. You can’t.” Her voice broke. "You—you just can’t. If they’re scared of you, someone might—might do something stupid, or…” Her voice was hushed to whisper, eyes
welling up with tears. "Mukuro, if you hurt anyone because of me, they’ll have to… and I… I already lost you once."

I was shocked. She’d never said anything like that to me before. “Junko, I—I’m sorry.”

She hugged me tight, just like she had yesterday, and it wasn’t any less surprising this time. I wondered if it was something I would ever get used to. I cautiously reciprocated, hugging her in return more tentatively as I tried to ignore her crushing arms.

“The thought of something happening to you…” she whispered, sentence trailing off as if she were horrified by the mere thought.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I didn’t know you were worried.”

“Of course I’m worried,” said Junko. “How can you even say that?”

“You shouldn’t have to worry. I’m the older one, that should be my job.”

“Only by a few minutes.” She let go of me, managing a small smile.

I smiled back. “You should go to bed.”

“You’re probably right. ‘Night, ‘Kuro.”

“Goodnight, sis.”

She gave my hand a last squeeze, and then we returned to our rooms.

I was exhausted, but despite this I was restless. I didn’t know long I sat awake in bed, but I knew for sure I wasn’t getting a good night’s sleep.

—

I woke up exhausted, as predicted. I ignored my zombie-ish state as I washed my face. The water did little to help me wake. The purple shadows under my eyes were as pronounced as ever, perhaps even more so than usual. I could do little about them. I didn’t know why I was so preoccupied with my appearance. Perhaps it was the effect of being surrounded by beautiful models and pop idols and athletes. I pushed it from my mind. I had more concerning problems.

I knew better than to hope yesterday had been a dream, but even so, the naive part of me still wished. I had not been particularly close with Sakura or Hifumi, but they were my classmates nonetheless. More than just classmates, they might’ve even been my friends. I’d never had many friends.

Monokuma had made an announcement to gather in the gym that morning, so instead of heading to the dining hall as per usual, I headed over to the gym. I didn’t see Makoto until I arrived, but I presumed we’d have our collective breakfast after the announcement.

Monokuma was… exercising.

We watched him, every single one of us had the same questioning look on our faces.

“One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four!” Monokuma stood on his podium, rotating his arms in large circles. “Is that everyone?”

We didn’t respond. However, I realized there were only… thirteen of us? The gym seemed unusually sparse.
From the back of the gym, I spotted the last figure creep their way inside. Hina stayed in the very back, trying not to draw much attention to herself.

However, Monokuma spotted her. “And she finally arrives!” said Monokuma. “Guess that makes everyone. Hina, you’re one of those fitness nuts, aren’t you? Won’t you join your lovely headmaster in a warm-up?”

She said nothing, looking just about ready to bolt as the eyes of the other classmates turned to her. She seemed… wilted. All the exuberant energy we were used to had been drained, replaced by a stranger with a sad, vacant expression.

“You look rough,” said Leon.

She grimaced. “Gee, thanks.”

It was true. She looked about as bad as I felt. Still, it wasn’t the sort of thing one voiced aloud.

She turned to Monokuma. “Let’s get this over with. What did you call us in for?”

“Yes,” said Kyoko to Monokuma. “I highly doubt you called us here just to exercise.”

“Patience is a virtue, is what I say,” said Monokuma, not even breaking pace as he continued to exercise. He wheezed out a laugh, finally coming to a stop. “Kidding, Kidding, nah, just...” pant, “allow...” pant, “me...” pant, “to catch...” pant, “my breath!”

“You are a toy,” said Byakuya. “Get on with it.”

Monokuma hung his head in feigned sadness. “A bear can’t catch a break around here... Very well, if you are so eager to see the brave new world I have prepared for you, I will tell you the news!”

“Huh?” asked Toko. “B-brave new world?”

“Yes!” said Monokuma. “Every time a trial comes to an end, it’s only the beginning! A new world opens up to you! Granted you’re all still alive to see it, of course.” He grinned devilishly. “Now, go explore!” he insisted. “Go! Consider it a gift from yours truly. Puhuhuhuhu!” He disappeared behind the podium.

We looked around at each other.

“What do you think he meant by a ‘new world’?” asked Sayaka in a mixture of anxiety and curiosity.

“Do you think... a way out, perhaps?” asked Chihiro.

“I highly doubt it,” said Celeste. She sighed. “The Mastermind would never make escape so easy. However,” she smiled, mood flipping on a dime in an instant, “perhaps there is more to the school than we anticipated. Who knows? We may even find something that improves our way of life.”

Chihiro bowed her head. “I suppose it was wishful thinking.” The very brief moment of hope in her eyes was gone.

“It c-could be a trap,” suggested Toko.

“I don’t see why,” said Kyoko. “I doubt the Mastermind would want to harm us himself. That would ruin the game for him. Best if we scope out the landscape at the very least. We should understand the terrain.”
“Makoto?” I asked, turning to look at him, waiting for his judgement.

"You're asking for my call?" asked Makoto.

I gave him a questioning look. "Don't we always?"

I'd come to trust his judgement. The others had as well.

"R-Right." He frowned, thinking it over for a moment. “We’ll… explore the school. Uh... You know what? How did it function last time?” He grinned sheepishly. “I was unconscious when that happened, of course, but I think it was the right idea.”

“Actually, we sort of just split up into groups and went from there!” said Sayaka. “There was no process of decision. We all just grouped up on our own.”

“Oh, um… perfect,” said Makoto. “Thank you, Sayaka.”

“No problem!” Her smile was encouraging.

He stuttered something unintelligible, blushing all the while. “Sounds good to me. Is everyone good with that?” He checked the clock. “It’s nearly 7:30 a.m. How does everyone feel about gathering in the dining hall in an hour?”

“Perfect!” said Junko. She grabbed me by the hand. “Come on, ‘Kuro, let’s go.”

“Wait,” I said, glancing back at the others then back at her, “Are you sure—”

But before I’d even had a chance to finish my sentence she’d dragged me out of the room.

“Junko, where are we going?” I asked as we whizzed past the trophy room and into the main hall.

“This way,” said Junko impatiently. We came to a stop at the foot of the stairs just outside the gym. They were no longer blocked by the grate. “Ta-da!” said Junko.

“Curious,” I pondered. I was messing with her, just a little. Stalling. However, I did find it strange that the grate was gone.

She tugged on my arm, trying to lead me up the stairs. “Come on,” she whined.

“You’re surprisingly enthusiastic about this,” I said, suppressing a smile.

“Hey!” said Junko. “Look, I know I usually give off the dissatisfied celebrity mega-bitch vibe, but I'm turning a new leaf. New me is only good vibes from here on out!”

"Is that so?"

"Also, I like winning," she added. "So I’d very much like to beat everyone else at finding any cool new shit on the second floor. So come on, let’s go!"

I chuckled. “Alright, alright.”

I followed her up the stairs and onto the second floor.

I was too busy looking around to notice the other students soon following us up the stairs, despite the sound of footsteps registering in the back of my mind. The ceilings were high, the lighting blue and green. As far as excitement was concerned, it wasn’t much different from the first floor.
The pair of us first checked one of the empty classrooms. It looked indistinguishable from the classrooms found on the first floor, so that was a bust. Same as before, all the windows were bolted shut. Cameras and monitors everywhere.

“Maybe we could get Mondo to try the bolts on these windows,” I mused. “Since, uh…” I thought about Sakura, and for a moment I allowed myself to feel the sadness before I pushed the thought from my mind. Now was not the time for tears. I had made the choice to move forward.

“You can ask him if you want,” said Junko. She either hadn’t noticed my pause or had chosen to ignore it. “I’m good. Guy’s a bit too much of a wild card for me.”

I mock gasped. “Junko Enoshima, afraid?”

“Hell no!” She shook her head indignantly. “Not afraid,” she bargained. “Just… practical.”

“I didn’t take you for a realist.”

“I just don’t want him to punch me! Come on, you saw what happened to Makoto, he was out like a light! Even I’m not that risky, I don’t have a deathwish.”

As she said this, she paid little attention to me. Rather, she’d grabbed a piece of chalk and was doodling on the chalkboard. There was a strange drawing of Monokuma posing like a model in a seashell bra.

Gross.

She quickly erased it, probably thinking the same thing as me. Instead, she replaced it with a drawing of a bunny.

“Yeah,” I said, continuing out conversation despite her preoccupation. “He knocked out Makoto, and then you laughed about it.”

“I’m… going through a character arc?” She glanced back at me. Even she didn’t seem to buy her excuse.

I rolled my eyes. “Alright, alright. I’ll ask. Later maybe. I’m not particularly keen on finding him.”

Checking the clock, the time read 7:40. We still had plenty of time left.

Once we had stepped outside the classroom, I turned to Junko. “So where to, sis?”

She pointed to the double doors labeled “POOL”. “There.”

“Gotcha.”

Inside, there were already several other people looking around the room.

“Aw, looks like the others have caught up with my head start,” said Junko.

Celeste nodded a hello to us as we walked into the room, I returned with a small wave of acknowledgement. Junko shot her a cheesy grin. Mondo grumbled something along the lines of hello.

“Well, speak of the devil,” muttered Junko.

I sighed, ignoring her comment. “The classrooms on this floor are all still barred off by those bulky
metal plates—” I said, addressing the entire room.

“Yeah, so I’m pretty sure a way out is a no-go,” said Junko.

“Fucking hell,” said Mondo, more to himself than to either of us. Then to us, “Guess I could take a crack at it. No harm in trying, right?”

Behind Mondo’s back, I could physically see Junko’s literal sigh of relief. Guess she didn’t have to ask after all. Crisis averted.

Despite the promise of “POOL” in big bold capital letters, the doors were, of course, not the entrance to the pool. Rather it looked to be a weight room. It was mostly empty: kickboards of different colors all lined up in a row, giant rolls of pool rope, camera and monitor as usual, a ring buoy hung up on the wall. To my surprise, Chihiro was too distracted with examining the exercise equipment to notice us come into the room.

I stood beside her. “Hello, Chihiro.”

“Oh!” She jumped back in fright.

“Sorry, did I startle you?”

“Just a bit.” She looked pleased to see me, but her smile was half-hearted.

“I see you’re eyeing the exercise equipment. I didn’t take you for a fitness nut.”

“I’ve… been hoping to start.” She seemed hesitant to answer.

“Maybe Hina would be willing to help you out,” I offered. Lowering my voice to a murmur, I added, “I think she could use the company right now.”

“I—I’ll think about it.”

Interesting. Yesterday, Chihiro hadn’t seemed particularly angry with Hina.

Perhaps it was something else.

“There’s way more stuff in the locker rooms,” said Mondo, who I hadn’t even realized had been listening to our conversation. “It’s not all that, but it’s better than nothing.”

“It’s alright,” said Chihiro, voice even smaller than usual. “I—I have a thing about locker rooms, see…”

So my hunch was correct. The problem wasn’t Hina. I wanted to let it be, but Mondo was a bit slow to catch on.

“Huh?” said Mondo. “Don’t tell me. You scared o’ locker rooms or somethin’?”

Chihiro was looking about as panicked as a deer in the headlights when Celeste seemed to catch wind and cut into the conversation. “This is all very splendid, don’t you agree? And from what the other students have mentioned, I hear there is a library on this floor as well! What great additions to improve our school life.” She smiled.

“A library!” Chihiro’s face lit up. “Is it true?”

“Indeed,” said Celeste. “I must say, things feel much more comfortable. It might even be almost
worth the occasional class trial.” She giggled behind her hand.

Mondo and Chihiro were sufficiently distracted. Celeste and I made eye contact as their backs were turned. I nodded in thanks, and she returned the nod ever so slightly in acknowledgement.

Junko moved to stand next to me. “I knew he wouldn’t get it. The walking beefcake doesn’t seem to be the kind to be self-conscious,” she said to me only. Under her breath of course. She didn’t want to antagonize him.

I shrugged. “You never know.”

She put an elbow on my shoulder, leaning on me casually. “Please, dude is fearless. Just saying, he seems more like the reason more Makoto-sized, less refrigerator-built people might feel scared to go into a locker room.”

“So he’s a little jock-y,” I said in that same low murmur. “Like you don’t make people feel bad about themselves on a daily basis, Miss Pop Idol.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder, flashing a smug grin that showed off her brilliant white teeth. “I try.”

Attention turning back to the room, I noticed on the opposite side to the entrance there were a pair of doors, presumably to aforementioned the girls and boys locker rooms. Each had a little panel to scan and identify our e-handbooks.

Pretty typical for the most part, with one large glaring exception: the huge machine gun hanging from the ceiling and pointed the direction of the locker rooms.

“Uh, question?” said Junko, addressing the whole room. She and eye both made eye contact before looking right back up at the gun. “What the fuck is that?” She pointed.

Celeste glanced over, following her line of sight. “A machine gun. Monokuma installed it to, and I believe his phrasing more or less was ‘to keep you perverts out of the wrong locker rooms, because teens your age will hump anything with a heartbeat’.” Hearing those words in her detached cadence and unfamiliar accent was almost hilarious. “Apparently your handbook is required in order to use the locker rooms.”

“That’s right!”

Collectively, we whipped around at the sound of the agonizingly familiar voice, and indeed, Monokuma was standing right there.

“You!” Junko glared, hands on her hips.

Mondo looked equally cross. “You better have a good goddamn reason for showing up again!”

“Honestly, can’t we have one moment of peace?” asked Celeste. She sighed. It said something about how grating Monokuma could truly be that Celeste was losing patience with him.

“Just felt the need to reiterate how important that rule is!” said Monokuma. “Commendable job, Celestia, but undersold! Besides, didn’t you guys miss me?” He grinned cheekily, blushing slightly. “Remember: only a boy’s handbook can open up the boys locker room and the same goes for the girls!”

“Huh?” asked Junko. “But couldn’t a guy just sneak in after a girl unlocks the room, or the other
way around?”

Monokuma bared his claws. “Any trespassers who commit such an act of indecency will be punished!” He pointed to the mounted gun. “See? There’s a Gatling gun. And it’ll be all DUKKA DUKKA DUKKA DUKKA!”

He seemed to be enjoying himself. We certainly weren’t. Junko muttered something under her breath. Mondo stood there, fists clenched at his side.

“Are you crazy?” demanded Junko. “You could kill someone with that!”

“Besides, couldn’t a boy borrow a girl’s handbook if they truly wanted to get into the locker room?” asked Celeste.

Monokuma gasped. “I never thought of that! Such a glaring omission. The shame, the shame. I would never allow anyone to use such trickery! From now on, I shall create a rule: lending your e-handbook to another student is strictly forbidden.”

“Oh, ok, gotcha,” said Junko, impatiently. “Now are you done? Is it over?”

Junko sulked. “You’d think this place’d be a little more impressive considering all the heavy security.”

“I think it was more about the who is in here rather than the what,” I answered, examining the poster on the wall.

“It was a picture of a group of pretty guys, captioned "Tornado". I didn't really know who they were, but they looked vaguely familiar. My best guess was it must've been some famous boyband. I never really kept track of that kind of stuff.

Upon entering, I noticed Kyoko was in here alone, crouching as she looked through the lockers.

“Hello, Kyoko,” I said.

“Hello.” She did not look my way.
“Miss Super-Soldier checking out the facilities?” asked Junko. “Looking to up your physique in case anyone tries to off you in your sleep?”

I frowned, displeased with Junko's cavalier attitude, but Kyoko seemed unperturbed.

“Actually, I was just leaving.” She stood up brusquely, brushing herself off and heading out the door, nearly bumping into me in the process.

I watched her go.

Junko whistled. “What a weirdo.”

“Heh, yeah.” My laugh was weak.

For just a moment, I was itching to follow her. Where did that girl always disappear off to?

Then the moment passed, and I returned to reality where Junko and I decided to check out the last room.

Finally, there was the pool.

Large and empty, spanning nearly the entire room, it looked about as uninviting as a pool could look. There was the addition of some bleachers, the typical camera and monitor, empty lifeguard chairs, a solitary empty locker all the way across the way.

And to our surprise, one person sat poolside.

Upon hearing us enter, she turned around. “Who’s there?” she called out, voice echoing throughout the large room, sounding much more antsy then her usual cheerful cadence.


“Oh, hi guys!” said Hina. There was a huge smile plastered on her face. She sniffed, wiping her nose and then waving at us.

Junko grabbed me by the arm. She whispered, “Kuro, are you sure—”

“Yes.”

Junko nodded, letting go of my arm.

I sat down next to Hina. Her shoes and socks were off, feet hanging off the deck and wading in the pool.

“What are you doing here?” Her hair stood on end. She didn’t look at me, nor did she really look inviting for conversation.

“Just wanted to check out the facilities,” I said. “Makes sense you’d be the first one here to find this place.” I smiled. Junko just watched us.

It was hardly a joke, but Hina laughed, the sound echoing throughout the large room.

“I didn’t know you liked to swim,” I said, not entirely truthfully. I’d done my fair share of research on my classmates before the first day. It seemed there wasn’t a sport that Hina couldn’t master.

“Oh, yeah!” She nodded, still looking down at the water and not over at me. “I joined, like... uh...”
She counted them off on her fingers. “Six sports teams back at my old school. Softball is my claim to fame, or something like that…” She frowned, kicking her legs. The water made a splash.

“You ok?” I asked.

“What? Oh, yeah. O’ course!” Hina said. She waved me off. “I’ll be fine, I just—” Her cheerful demeanor faltered, only to be reinstated in less than a moment. “I remembered that I was feeling kinda down because I missed breakfast.”

“Oh,” said Junko. “Ok, I’ll… get something for you.” She gave me a pointed look. “Sis, holler if you need anything, right?” She left, leaving the two of us alone.

Hina’s demeanor changed once Junko left the room. She eyed me warily. “You’re not gonna make fun of me, are you? I know you’re scared of me, just like everybody else.”

I shrugged.

Hina sighed. When she realized I wasn’t going anywhere, she continued. “I thought coming here would make me feel better. But…”

“It won’t be instantaneous,” I said. “It never is.” I’d seen my fair share of grief over the years.

She shook her head. “There’s no use getting down,” she muttered, and she seemed to be talking more to herself than to me. “It’s no use. I can’t waste my time being sad. Everything is gonna turn around!” She looked resolute. It was almost convincing. “I should be fine.” She looked at me. “Why am I not fine?”

“Hina…”

She quickly stood up. “I just… I-I shouldn’t be here. I should be doing laps. Or reps. Or anything! Anywhere but here. It’s just like Makoto said! I can’t give in to despair!” She just kept on rambling. She froze, eyes wide. “I… I have to go!”

She bolted, leaving me by myself.

—

Leaving the pool, there were more people outside the locker rooms than I’d seen previously. Sayaka glanced at me as I walked in.

“Mukuro?” she asked.

“Hm?” I stopped as she grabbed my attention.

“Um…” She looked hesitant to ask.

“Yo, we just saw Hina full on sprinting down the hallway,” said Leon, who was standing by her side. “Any idea what the hell that was about?”

“Uh,” I contemplated the right way to phrase it, “She’s kind of… having a rough time, I think?”

Sayaka tugged Leon by the sleeve. “Should we talk to her?”

"I... don't know," I said honestly.

"Hey, if she needs space, you don't gotta twist my arm to convince me," said Leon.
"Well, I was just in talks with her. She was hanging around--"

"Mukuro," said Sayaka, looking back to me. "A little birdy told me there was a pool?"

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Just came from there actually. How did you—"

"Psychic." She beamed.

I quirked an eyebrow.

She giggled. "Kidding! There was a sign, of course! Did you hear that, Leon? Sounds about right up your alley."

He groaned. "Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Keep saying what?" Just then, Junko entered the room. "Can someone explain to me why Hina is doing stair-steppers?"

"Sis!"

"Mukuro was just telling us that Hina is having a bit of a crisis," said Sayaka.

"Aw, that’s too bad," said Junko. "I just grabbed her this package of donuts. Want 'em?" She held them out to me.

I took them hesitantly, with no real intent on eating them. However, they were small enough to fit into my coat pocket.

Junko continued. "Ran into Makoto downstairs, by the way, apparently all sorts of shit on the first floor opened up that we totally missed! He asked me about you, by the way," said Junko to me, stating one thing after the other in rapid-fire succession.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you," she said, "Unless there’s another Mukuro around here I missed. Which is weird because it’s not like he couldn’t just march upstairs and talk to you himself." She was on a roll. "Anyway, I know Mukuro must be dying to check out the library next door so the two of us are gonna do that while you two lovebirds can check out the pool."

“Oh, we-we’re not—” Sayaka stuttered and blushed.

Junko ignored her, grabbing me by the hand again and we were already gone.

“I know all the stuffy academia is not really my scene, but I figured you’d be into it," Junko said to me, not even giving me time to register what was going on as she pushed open the door to the library.

Inside, the shelves were lined with books upon books. For what was supposedly a well-funded school, the library was surprisingly small. The lighting was, to put it plainly, pretty shit, especially for a library. However, there were two desks, one with a small plug-in lamp. Chihiro, Byakuya, Toko, and Kyoko were already present.

“'Sup.” Junko threw a peace sign. Chihiro smiled in hello, but the rest ignored her.

I perused the shelves.
“Anything catching your fancy?” asked Junko.

I shrugged. I caught sight of a door at the back of the library. “What’s that?”

“Oh, um,” said Chihiro. She opened the door to show me. It was a tiny room even darker and dingier than the library itself packed to the brim with binders and loose folders. “Just a second room.”

“Nothing of use,” interjected Byakuya. I hadn’t even realized he’d been paying attention to our conversation. If he was, he appeared to only be half-listening. He hadn’t even turned to address us.

“It seems to be an archive?” said Chihiro. It sounded like a question. “Old files, stuff belonging to the school. Not really books…”

“You looked through these?” I asked her.

“Just took a peek,” admitted Chihiro. “There’s a whole shelf of old police files for cold cases and—and stuff. Although… I don’t know how the school would get ahold of information like that…” Her voice trailed off, and she closed the door.

I was surprised Chihiro was interested in that sort of thing. She seemed far too meek and gentle to be interested in anything like old crime cases.

“Hmm.”

Toko was muttering to herself, shaking her head as she flipped through books on the shelves.

“Toko, what’s wrong?” asked Chihiro.

“N-nothing!” she snapped. After a moment, she added. “I was j-just hoping there might—there might be s-something for me to read.”

“Found anything that catches your eye?” Chihiro’s smile seemed genuinely hopeful.

Toko glanced over at the bookshelves where Byakuya was browsing, then back down at the ground. “Nope.”

“Oh, well. That’s too bad!” said Chihiro.

“W-what?” said Toko. She looked surprised that Chihiro had bothered to continue their conversation beyond her short response. “W-why would you say that?”

“Huh?” asked Chihiro. “Because I thought the library would be more… your wheelhouse? I thought maybe we could trade recommendations or—forget I asked.”

“They don’t have anything pertaining to my interests,” muttered Toko. “No manga, no comics, no fic. Is that what you wanted me to say?” Her voice continued to rise. “S-so that you could m-make fun of—make fun of me and call my taste low-brow? Everybody else already does!”

Chihiro looked backed into a corner. “What? No, that’s not what I—”

“Kyoko,” I interrupted loudly, “What brings you here?”

It worked. Toko backed off from Chihiro, who was saved from disaster for the second time that day.

At hearing my question, Kyoko glanced up at me and then back down at the shelves. “I suppose I don’t really come across as much of a bookworm, do I?”
“T-that’s not what I meant.” I blushed.

She grabbed a title off the shelves, took a glance at it and flipped through a few pages. When I made my way nearer to her, she showed me the cover.


“Yeah, I…” Her voice was quiet. She paused before adding, “I, uh…. used read all sorts of mystery stories growing up.”

“Heh,” I said. “So did I.”

Was that the traces of a smile I detected?

It seemed like it, but perhaps it was just my imagination because the next moment she was back to her usual impassive self. Kyoko didn’t respond, and instead she looked away and put the book back on the shelf.

Beside Kyoko, there was an old laptop sitting on an otherwise empty desk. I pressed the power button on the keyboard. Nothing.

Trying again, I fiddled around with the mousepad and keyboard a bit, but still no results.

“It’s broken,” said Byakuya, not even looking my way as he answered, despite it being obvious by this point.

I refrained on my desire to say something biting in response.

“Hmm,” said Kyoko. “That’s too bad. I suppose it would’ve been foolish to hope the Mastermind would give us something so useful.” She sighed. “And the lighting in here is less than ideal.”

“Hey. Byakuya, you like computers, right?” asked Junko, although knowing her it was more antagonistic than genuine curiosity.

“Like I said, it’s broken,” said Byakuya. “It’s of no use to me.”

She raised an eyebrow, scrutinizing him, but he remained unruffled. When she determined she could wring no further material out of him, whether useful or mocking, she huffed impatiently.

“Ugh,” said Junko. “This place is seriously collecting dust.” She picked up a card from one of the smaller bookshelves, giving it a disgusted look as she shook it free of dust. When shaking it didn’t seem to work, she blew at the card, the remaining dust collecting into a large cloud.

She coughed, and so did I. Junko pulled the card out of its envelope. Scanning it for a moment, she paused to look up at me. Her eyes were wide. “Mukuro,” she said, “come see this.” She waved me over.

I read the letter over her shoulder.

“Dear students of Hope’s Peak,” I read aloud. I continued to read the contents of the letter, and when I had finished, I looked up at Junko. “So the school has been shut down until further notice…”

“But we only arrived here a few days ago,” said Chihiro. She frowned.

“Due to some unspecified tragedy.” I thought about the contents of the letter. It didn’t make any sense. Surely if this were true, we would’ve heard of such an event taking place, right?
“It’s not dated,” I said, “but judging by the layer of dust, it must be… at least a year old.”

Kyoko shook her head. “That makes no sense. We only arrived a few days ago at the very most.”

“Yeah, if there was a shutdown, we for sure would’ve heard something about it,” said Junko. “Right?” She shared uneasy looks with the rest of us. Eyeing the letter closer, she pointed to the bottom. “It’s signed from the headmaster of the school.”

“What?” asked Kyoko with a slight gasp, and judging by the tone of her voice, she was genuinely shaken. Even in times of distress, I’d never seen her quite like this before.

“Yeah,” said Junko, tapping at the signature again with her finger. “See, right there.”

“Give me that.” Kyoko snatched the letter away from Junko, scanning it up and down, but judging by the urgency in her tone I doubted that she would’ve met much resistance.

“So then this really is Hope’s Peak?” asked Toko. She was standing a good several feet away from the few of us crowding around the letter, but she had still been listening in on us. “That’s what the letter means, right? We weren’t taken somewhere else?”

“Could be one of Monokuma’s tricks,” said Junko.

“But if it is real. Then… whoever is trapping us here,” said Chihiro. “Do you guys think…” Her speech drifted off.

“What is it?” asked Byakuya. “Well then, spit it out.”

“Nevermind,” said Chihiro. “It was probably silly.”

“No idea is silly,” I said. I was relieved when for once Byakuya did not interject with something snide.

“Well, ok,” said Chihiro. “I was just thinking. Do you guys think… who ever is keeping us locked up here. Could it be the headmaster of the school?”

Kyoko’s grip tightened around the letter, wrinkling the paper.

“Whoa there, easy girl,” said Junko.

Kyoko ignored her. “The headmaster!” She muttered something under her breath. “We need to find out what’s going on in this goddamn school.”

“Well, we’ll have to put that thought on hold because at the moment it is 8:30 and we should already be downstairs,” said Junko. She nodded in the direction of the clock, and as it turned out, she was correct.

“Oh, come on,” I teased her. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t prefer to be fashionably late.”

She sighed a huge, fake sigh. “Oh, you’re right. You know me so well.”

My lip twitched in a small smile, worries pushed aside just for the moment. “I’d hope so.”

—

“Oh! Looks like this is everyone, is it?,” said Makoto as we made our way into the hall—fashionably late, as predicted. Looking at the clock, I could see it was already 8:35. He smiled broadly at me as I
entered the room.

“Hang on a sec,” said Hiro, counting heads, “there’s only 12 of us here, people are definitely missing.”

“Someone can count, what a shocker,” said Junko, snickering.

“Hey!... I’m a gambler. Of course I can count.”

I’d given up on chastising Junko for her quips, so I let it slide.

Sayaka piped up. “It’s Hina. Last we saw her, she was…. Um… I think she was pacing?” She frowned.

“Huh. Strange,” said Chihiro.

“What is it, Chihiro?” asked Makoto.

“Oh, um, it’s not just Hina. Someone else is missing.”

Junko nodded. “What I think Chihiro is referring to is that Mr. Punctual is strangely absent.”

“Who?” asked Leon.

She scoffed. “Taka, of course!”

“So Taka and Hina are both late. How very uncharacteristic of both of them,” said Celeste coolly.

Mondo turned to me. “Hey, Mukuro, do us a solid would ya and go find Hina for us?”

“Hm? Why me?” I shot him a questioning look. Admittedly, I was a bit annoyed. I didn’t like being turned into an errand boy.

“Because you’re closest to the door, that’s how it works.”

That was most certainly not how it worked, but I didn’t find the idea of arguing with an ultimate fighter all too appealing.

Without knowing it, I must’ve been giving him some sort of look because he added, practically yelling, “Hey, don’t look at me like that! I ain’t scared, even if that chick is sketch as hell! Look, just do it ok?”

I nodded hurriedly.

To my surprise, he grinned and gave me an enthusiastic thumbs up. “Hey, thanks for that! You got this!”

Was this what it was like to experience whiplash?

I was so thrown that I barely even registered Sayaka speak. “Don’t worry, I’ll go with you!” Before I could even respond, she was by my side, arm interlinked with mine as she led me along. She smiled at me. “Let’s go!”

It happened so fast, I didn’t even have time to object.

Once outside, Sayaka turned to me while we walked. “Mondo is a rather strange person, wouldn’t
you say?"

“Perhaps. But I think you have to be a little strange to end up here.”

“Good point. But he’s rather undisciplined and hot-tempered for a trained fighter…” she mused.

I thought about Makoto, knocked out on the very first day.

“I mean, poor Makoto!” said Sayaka, almost as if she could read my mind. “That was so scary. I’m sure Mondo means well, but I just don’t know whether to think he’s a good or bad person.”

“Well…” I paused, “I don’t think he really has to be either.”

“Huh?” asked Sayaka, brow furrowing quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“I-I mean,” I faltered, suddenly feeling unsure under her gaze, “nobody is 100% good or bad. He isn’t faultless,” I said, and I thought about how I’d blown up at the others the previous night, “… but neither am I.”

She thought about it. “Wow, Mukuro! That’s so wise.”

“Just speaking from experience. Even the Ultimates aren’t perfect, even if… some of you, seem to come really close.” As I said this I looked away bashfully, my face growing warm. I snuck a glance up at her before hastily looking away again.

“You don’t mean…. Oh!” Sayaka laughed. “Oh please, you flatter me. I’m far from perfect.” She waved her hand carelessly, as if to wave off my statement itself. She smiled once again. Something about that warm smile of hers set me at ease.

The pair of us ran into Taka going up the stairs to the second floor. We caught him as he was heading down, and we nearly ran into each other.

“Taka!” exclaimed Sayaka in both surprise and joy.

“Ah!” he responded, equally as surprised, stumbling and nearly falling over.

“Oh my goodness! Careful, that could’ve been dangerous,” said Sayaka with a sympathetic smile.

He brushed himself off. “Forgive me, I was being absent-minded and careless, but thank you for your concern.” He switched gears, straightening his posture. “Mukuro and Sayaka! It is most fortunate that I would run into you at a time like this! It’s Hina.”

“We know,” said Sayaka. “We were sent to look for her just now by the others.”

“Then you will be pleased to hear that I know where she is!”

“Great!” said Sayaka. “Can you take us to her?”

He hesitated.

“Taka?” I asked.

His expression seemed to fall for just a moment. “Well, see… The thing about that is… I ran into her just outside the pool. It was about ten minutes to 8:30, so I reminded her of the meeting, of course. But…”
“But?” asked Sayaka.

“I shamefully admit I was unsuccessful in getting her to attend! I have been unable to find her since.” His hands were clenched into fists, jaw set in frustration as his eyes began to water. His eyes went wide in realization. “The meeting! I’m so incredibly late. Please forgive my tardiness! I cannot believe I have allowed myself to fall so low.”

“It’s ok, Taka, nobody is blaming you,” said Sayaka. “It’s very thoughtful of you to think of including Hina.” She turned to me. “So Taka has been unable to find her, we have several accounts of her spending the past half hour working out, and she was last seen outside the pool entrance…” She seemed to be thinking aloud, counting off each clue on her fingers as she listed them off. “Which means…”

I nodded. We seemed to be on the same wavelength. “We should—”

“Check the girls locker rooms?” she asked.

“How did you—”

“I’m psychic!” She giggled. “Kidding. Intuition. I’m no psychic, but maybe I could make a good detective’s assistant?”

“Well, get in line because I think Junko’s already gunning for that position,” I said. “It’s a good hunch, though, so you could definitely give her a run for her money.”

The pool entrance was not far from the stairs, so getting there took hardly any time at all.

Just outside the girls locker room, Sayaka and I paused to look at Taka.

“Um…” said Sayaka. “Taka, it’s probably best if you wait outside for this.” She pointed to the gun mounted to the ceiling.

“Hm?” He followed the direction of her hand until his eyes landed on the gun. “Oh! Y-yes, of course! I wouldn’t dream of—I would never!” He was bright red.

I chuckled, I couldn’t help it.

“I shall wait right here if you need me!” He added, feet planted firmly in place.

Sayaka had already swiped us in, and I was assuring him with thank yous when Sayaka took a look inside and turned to me.

“She’s not here.”

“What?” I asked.

“Have a look for yourself, it’s empty.”

I peeked my head inside, and she was right. Nobody was there.

However, there was a jacket and pair of sneakers that looked awfully familiar.

“Hm… Let’s check the pool deck. Which means Taka, you can meet us there.”

Once out on the pool deck, the three of us spotted a figure swimming in the water.
I breathed a sigh of relief. Finally.

“Hina!” called Sayaka. When she didn’t respond, she tried again. “Hina!”

I approached the pool.

Hina broke the surface of the water, shaking her head clear of water and breathing heavily. “Oh! I didn’t see you there.” She swam to the side of the pool, resting her arms on the side.

“Hina! Do you have any idea what time it is?” asked Taka. “You’re supposed to be in the dining hall!”

She laughed. “Heh, sorry! Guess it slipped my mind. I was doing laps, the time got away from me.”

“Hina, are you alright?” asked Sayaka.

“Yeah! I’m fine!” said Hina. Her voice was high pitched. “Why wouldn’t I be fine? I’m alive. I still have my health. You can’t let the bad things keep you down, you know?”

Sayaka nodded. “That’s the spirit! I’m glad you’re ok, but you really ought to come with us.”

“Gotcha, but I still have like twenty more laps, ok?”

“Hina,” said Sayaka. She was beginning to sound impatient.

“Guys, this is so much better for everyone, right? I mean, everyone is mad at me, anyway, so this way everyone wins!”

I decided to speak. “I realize that you’re hurting over Sakura, but you are not to blame.”

Hina frowned. “I know that.” She pulled herself up out of the pool, grabbing a towel that was lying nearby and draped it over her shoulders.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know that,” she said again. “I mean, I do. I should. I mean, if Sakura were here I know she’d want me to be tough, right? She’d say something like ‘Hina, I need you to be strong for me’.” She tried to mimick the sound of Sakura’s voice. “I can imagine her saying that, can’t you?” No response. “So that’s what I’m doing! I’m tough. I don’t need anyone. I…” Her voice broke. “don’t know how to fix this. I-I don’t know how to make things right with you guys.” She began to cry.

Sayaka rushed to her side. “Oh honey,” she said, ignoring the water and giving Hina a hug. “It’s gonna be ok. Everything is ok.”

Hina stammered through some muffled sobs. “I-I… I just. I don’t—”

“See? Everything is gonna be ok!” said Sayaka, pulling away from Hina to look at her. She snapped her fingers. “I got it! We can head back to the dining hall, and get you a real and proper breakfast! Doesn’t that sound nice? We can fix this. Let’s turn that frown upside-down!” She began to head out, but paused when she realized that Hina was still not following. “Hina?”

Taka looked over at Sayaka then to Hina. “I…”

“What is it?” asked Hina.

He looked hesitant. “I would like to say something!”
“Taka, I don’t know if that’s a good idea—” began Sayaka, but Taka ignored her.

“In most cases I would commend you for working as hard as you do. But you seem distressed. It is important to take care of all aspects of your health.”

Hina nodded slightly. “I have to find some way to keep up with my teammates. Choosing school over the team was one of the hardest decisions I’ve had to make. And when I met Sakura… We were supposed to be training partners. She never even got to see the second floor of the school. She’d help me with sit-ups, you know?” She frowned. “Look, you guys can say whatever you want, it’s fine because yes she might’ve been a questionable person but she was trying to save me! Even you all tell me I’m foolish, I have to believe she… that is who she was.”

“Well,” said Taka, “if it is any consolation, Hina. You may have lost one friend. But you have us.”

Wow.

Sayaka glanced over at me. Had I said that aloud? Or had she read my mind, as she always did?

“Taka…” Hina looked at a loss for words.

“And as the dedicated best friends you could ever hope for, we will never leave your side!” said Taka, back to his unusual intensity— and loud volume. He began to cry, but thankfully they were not tears of sadness. “We will not disappoint you!”

“And he's back,” I muttered under my breath.

Sayaka snickered. All the same, she looked about as shaken as I felt.

Thankfully, they didn't hear us. Hina had laughed, pulling Taka into a what must’ve been a pretty damp hug.

Just then I remembered the pack of donuts I’d taken from Junko. “Here.” I pulled them out of my pocket and tossed them to her. She caught them with ease, despite the fact that she was one handed because she was still hugging Taka.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Donuts,” I said. “It won’t solve everything, but it’ll at least count as breakfast.”

“Name a problem donuts can’t solve,” said Hina with a half-hearted laugh. After taking a moment to recompose herself, Hina finally let go of Taka, wiping her eyes. “Thanks.” She sniffed. “I'm ok now. We can go.”

“Hopefully the meeting isn't over,” I said.

—

As Taka and Hina were in absorbed in rapt conversation, Sayaka followed closely behind, watching them with an awestruck expression. “How did he do that?” she whispered to me.

I shrugged. “I have no clue,” I said through a laugh as I shook my head, equally as confounded. “I guess… You were trying to make her happy.”

“But that’s what she needed. Right? That’s always what people need.”

“Well, maybe she just needed a good cry,” I said.
And someone as emotional and excessively hard-working as she is to bring that out.

As talented and kind-hearted as Sayaka was, that wasn’t something with which I could see her resonating. She just always seemed so happy. Even in hard times she was pretty unwavering. The only time I could remember that happy-go-lucky attitude disappearing was when Monokuma revealed our first motive. Still, I was surprised that Taka seemed to have gotten to Hina. He wasn’t always the most perceptive person in the world. Still, he had his moments. Perhaps I’d misjudged him.

Sayaka looked deep in thought. “Huh.” She didn’t speak the rest of the way.

We entered the dining hall to find the other students deep in conversation.

“So we don’t have any leads?” Makoto was muttering, in thought.

“Are you kidding? No clues at all?” said Junko.

“Well, we do have this letter,” said Chihiro.

“What about it?” said Kyoko.

“Hi guys,” said Hina.

Several heads turned upon hearing her come in.

“Whoa, it’s Hina!” said Hiro, open mouth shock turning into a surprising grin. “You guys were gone for, like, a crazy long time.”

“We were starting to get worried,” said Chihiro.

“Really?” asked Hina.

“Of course!” said Makoto earnestly. “That’s why Mukuro and Sayaka were looking for you. Are you ok?”

“I think I will be,” said Hina, smiling gratefully.

Taka had been standing close to me upon entering the cafeteria. However, while Hina was being swarmed, I noticed Taka slink silently into the mass of students, unnoticed and ignored. Rather unusually, instead of making a scene he’d been completely silent.

I wanted to talk to him, just to reassure him of his helpfulness today with Hina, but instead I was bombarded by a familiar face. I never got the chance to tell him.

“’Kuro!” It was Junko. She came bounding up to me, grabbing me by the hands. “We are soooo sorry, but you guys were taking ages so we got started without you.” She pouted apologetically, looking up at me with big round puppy-dog eyes.

“Oh, it’s alright.”

“No, it’s not! It was shitty of us.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” said Makoto. “Pressure from the others, everyone went ahead and began sharing their findings so that’s how it ended up working.”

“Really, it’s ok,” I assured them. “Someone can just catch us up later. But what is this I hear about a
“lack of leads?”

Byakuya spoke. “There are no helpful additional clues to aid in our escape.”

“You’re still here?” asked Junko, shooting him an annoyed look.

“Not for much longer,” he said. “Now that everyone is arrived and caught up, I have no further purpose here.” He walked bruskly out the door.

“Oh no, he’s gone, what a shame,” said Junko, voice laced with sarcasm.

“Anyway, Byakuya is right, yeah? We’re still trapped like mice in a cage. Not for lack of trying,” said Hiro. “We searched this place top to bottom!”

“Yeah,” said Mondo. “And you and Junko were right about those metal plates. Wouldn’t budge an inch.” For a moment, he seemed resolute, but he cracked his knuckles, seemingly agitated. “But that doesn’t mean I’m givin’ up just yet! I swear, I’ll get out of this fuckin’ place if it kills me!”

“That is all well and good, but I do hope you mean what you say,” said Celeste.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“Yeah!” said Junko. “The way you talk, you make it seem like you don’t even want to get out of here.”

“Well, I would be willing to bet that too much resistance will be met with punishment from the Mastermind,” said Celeste. “Particularly if you violate the school rules. I hope you are willing to die in your attempt for that freedom.”

He grit his teeth. “Shit… I ain’t dying. I know that much.”

“Then may I suggest adaptation as a means for survival?” She smiled, as if she were merely suggesting the special at a restaurant, not a survival tip for a school of mutual killing. “As I said before, if you continue to expose your weakness, you will die.”

“I ain’t weak,” said Mondo. “But… I see what you’re getting at. I’ll back off, but that doesn’t mean I’m done fighting just yet.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t expect anything less of the Ultimate Martial Artist,” said Celeste.

“Yeah, yeah,” grumbled Junko. “Cool it, Elvira. Message received, no rocking the boat until after you’ve gotten your spa day.”

“Hm?” I asked.

“Oh, you were gone for that part,” said Junko. “Makoto was checking the first floor, there’s now a pantry, a bathhouse, and a sauna.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “Cool?”

“It will certainly make things more comfortable for us,” said Celeste. “There is plenty of equipment and food to choose from in the pantry, granted we all stick to our word and do not go out at night time. We can certainly lead satisfying lives for quite some time in here.”

“Celeste has a point,” said Kyoko. “Rather than causing a commotion, we should be learning our new environment. We don’t want to cause too much suspicion. That doesn’t mean we stop looking
It was an unusual speech coming from Kyoko, considering the fact that she looked suspicious every time she disappeared for long stretches of time with no explanation.

Nevertheless, I agreed. “Absolutely. We just need to be smart about this.”

The others murmured in agreement.

“Well, with all that out of the way,” said Hina. “I think I’m game for a real breakfast.”

“Me, too,” I said, suddenly realizing how hungry I felt.

“Actually,” said Makoto. “When I said we started without you guys, I wasn’t just referring to the meeting. Sorry, we sort of ate already.”

Taka nodded sorrowfully. “It is fine. I shall face the consequences for my tardiness!”

“It’s not a big deal,” I said. “You guys go on ahead, I’ll just grab something right now.”

A few of the others waved their goodbyes. I even got a couple hugs.

“I’ll stay, too! Would you guys like something?” asked Sayaka to the rest of the latecomers: Hina, Taka, and myself.

“Oh, are you a cook?” asked Hina, her energy finally seeming to return for the first time in ages.

“The best!” said Sayaka. “I make a mean chili oil.”

“A condiment?” asked a shocked Taka.

She laughed. “Kidding, I’ll see what we have in the kitchen.”

Junko was still by my side. “I’m heading out. You gonna be ok?” She took me by the hands again.

I looked over at the other students then back to her. “Of course.”

“See? Now don’t you see the appeal of being fashionably late?”

“Mukuro, get over here!” called Hina, poking her head out of the kitchen.

“One sec!” I turned to Junko. “Sure, I’m just reveling in the attention.”

She laughed, giving my hands a squeeze before going—leaving me to my breakfast with the other fashionably late kids.

By this part of the story, Sayaka is kinda... dead so I hope I'm doing her character justice. I'm doing a lot of interpretation based on some kinda sparse canon data, so hopefully I'm not reaching. In my opinion, Sayaka's cheery attitude has a strange performative aspect to it, which I wanted to highlight. However, similarly, I feel like for
both Hina and Sayaka, their cheery personalities are the solution to their vulnerability, Sayaka by putting on a persona and Hina coping by trying to stay light-hearted because if she's too bogged down with sadness she becomes overwhelmed and depressed. Meanwhile, Taka isn't always the most perceptive person in the world but i figured the One (1) Thing he would probably catch onto is someone pouring themselves into their work as a coping mechanism for their loneliness.

Hina went to the Chris Traeger School for Dealing with Depression. "If I keep my body moving, and my mind occupied at all times, I will avoid falling into the bottomless pit of despair!"

Mukuro is finally learning how to flirt. Just a bit.

Vote for your favorite Junko Nickname &/or insult in the comments below!

Ok but for honest, please let me know who you want to get to know during free time! I went with two last time, but i think that was too few a number, so some of them will be plot related but I will also be sure to include the popular choices too! I really appreciate your feedback
Chapter 2.2: I Was Just Totally Clueless

Chapter Summary

Time for Free Time Events with the other students!

Chapter Notes

Everyone who requested a free time event with Junko. Fam... they’re sisters. Every day with Junko is a Free Time Event w/ Junko. (I'm kidding, I love you guys.)

This is kind of experimental.

Anyway, everyone seems to respond positively to Fortune Teller!Celeste so y'all can have your Celeste content. Finally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Call me crazy, but are we a few people short?” asked Hiro, scratching his chin.

“I swear to god, I’m having fucking deja vu,” muttered Junko to herself over her breakfast.

“Pardon?” I pulled up a chair beside her, looking around the dining hall.

“Once again, we’re a few kids short of a breakfast, just like Hiro is a few cards short of a deck,” said Junko. “Not this again. I thought we’d overcome the whole ditching thing yesterday.”

I did the briefest of head-counts, and he was right. Two people missing, and two people… gone.

I didn’t know if I would ever get used to the emptiness.

“Hmmm… Has anyone seen Makoto?” asked Sayaka.

Strange. He was usually a pretty early riser.

Chihiro shook her head. “No,” she said, “I haven’t seen him all morning. Usually he is here by now. Is he alright?”

“Well, how should we know that?” asked Junko. “Sorry, babe,” she added upon realizing who she’d snapped at. “I’m pre-morning coffee and all that. A girl needs her beauty sleep, and I’m exhausted.”

Chihiro smiled back, unperturbed.

“Well, how should we know that?” asked Junko. “Sorry, babe,” she added upon realizing who she’d snapped at. “I’m pre-morning coffee and all that. A girl needs her beauty sleep, and I’m exhausted.”

Chihiro smiled back, unperturbed.

“Anyway,” added Junko, “we should probably go look for him.”

“Absolutely!” I said immediately without thinking, rising to my feet.

Junko raised an eyebrow at me.
“Who are we looking for?” A familiar voice came from the entrance of the cafeteria.

“Makoto!”

The others rushed him.

“Thank god, you’re here!” said Sayaka. “We were so worried.” She was hovering by his side, one hand on his arm.

“Yeah! We were gonna go looking you!” said Hina.

Despite the rocky start, the others had been doing better about re-integrating her into the group. She still came to breakfasts, and there was still some hesitancy around her, but I was glad we were making progress. Hina’s overall mood seemed to be improving as well.

Once everyone had calmed down, I spoke. “Glad you’re here,” I said, nodding slightly.

“Oh, thank you for worrying!” he said, turning a light shade of red. “Thank y-you all, I mean! Of course! But I was actually going to talk to Byakuya. I was hoping to convince him to come join us, but I don’t think he’s in his room.” He frowned, and I felt the strange feeling of disgust for anyone who could ever let this boy down.

We looked around at each other, the question of what to do about Byakuya still in the air.

“Is there any hoping that if we just ignore the problem maybe it’ll go away?” asked Junko. When no one answered, she sighed, getting to her feet. “Fine. Let’s go find Four-Eyes.”

“I suggest some of us check the second floor!” said Taka. “But a few should stay behind.”

“If we split up, we can cover more ground,” said Makoto.

“Precisely!”

“S-stop trying to one up everyone!” whined Toko, but Taka ignored her.

“I’ll go check on his room again,” said Makoto. “Just one more time, just to make sure.”

“I’ll go with you!” said Sayaka.

There was something hasty about the way she’d said it.

Junko grabbed my hand, distracting me from my thoughts. “You and me are gonna stick together.”

Once outside the dining hall, Junko looked to me. “So, where to?”

Before I could answer, someone else spoke.

“Um, pardon me?”

We looked over, and Chihiro was standing beside us, raising a timid hand. “I don’t know if this is any help at all, but yesterday he did seem to be spending a strange amount of time fixated on the library. Sorry, I’m probably reading too far into things.”

I shook my head. “No, no, that’s a good hunch.”

“You know what? Now that I think about it, Ultimate Shut-In did show the barest trace of interest...
beyond his usual holier-than-thou disdain, of course,” said Junko.

“Exactly,” I said. “We can start there.”

“Oh? Then lead the way, Ultimate Detective,” said Junko, smirking.

—

Chihiro’s hunch appeared to be correct. When the three of us found Byakuya, he was sitting at a desk at the back of the classroom, reading a book. Distinctly remembered from yesterday that the lighting in the library was awful for reading, but then I saw beside him a lamp connected to an extension cord.

Junko stood in the doorway indignantly. “Hey!”

He ignored her.

“Hell-o?” said Junko. “Is this where you’ve been the whole time?”

“B-Byakuya!” said Makoto.

I hadn’t even noticed when he’d entered the room, but he must’ve heard Junko’s yelling.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m fishing,” said Byakuya, not bothering to look up from his book. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“We were all seriously worried about you!” said Makoto.

“Well…” began Junko, but Makoto ignored her as he continued.

“We went looking for you!”

“Did I ask you to do that?”

“We’re supposed to be spending breakfast together!” said Makoto. “We made a promise!”

Several of the others had wandered into the room, either from hearing the conversation or word of mouth, and they continued to spill in.

“A promise? Hmph. I thought I made it perfectly clear that as long as Hina is around, I have no wish to attend. I’m done participating in your delusional little co-op game.”

Hina had been one of the newcomers, but she must've heard what he had said because upon hearing this, she shied back as if hurt by his words.

“C-co-op?” asked Toko. “W-what do you mean?”

“Can you stop treating this like a joke?” asked Hina indignantly, recovering from her former wounded pride.

Celeste walked in and past everyone else, but from the way everyone was looking at her you’d think she’d fabricated out of thin air. Something about her just radiated poise and composure; all eyes were drawn to her.
“On the contrary,” said Celeste, despite the fact that I was fairly certain she had not been here to experience the entire conversation, “he is treating it like a game. A zero-sum game to be exact.”

“Oh, yeah, huh?” said Hiro. He scratched his head as though in thought. “You mean, a situation in which for one person to win, another's gotta lose.”

“A rudimentary explanation, but essentially, yes.”

Hiro raised an eyebrow. “You gamble? You're like twelve, yeah?”

“The words of the twenty-year old high schooler,” said Celeste, to which he only laughed good-naturedly. “Absolutely not, being underage, I would never participate in such illegal activities.” She smirked, and with the fact that she was laying it on so thick, I was wholly unconvinced.


“In a sense.” Celeste nodded. “It is a game in which competitors must scramble for limited resources. But actually, beyond gambling, many forms of social interaction fall into this category: entrance exams, sports tournaments, job openings.” For someone who supposedly did not participate, she certainly knew a lot. Her voice was impassive as always, but there was a strange gleam in her eyes. “In order to to succeed, someone else must fail.”

“Exactly,” said Byakuya. “And I wouldn’t want to be unprepared for our little game.”

“B-but that’s horrible!” said Chihiro, voice surprisingly resolute. “We can’t be treating this like a game! The price of failure is our lives! We shouldn’t fight! Win or lose, I don’t care. The idea of killing our friends is… is…”

“So eloquently put,” said Byakuya, voice full of sarcasm. “We are not friends. By nature of the game, we are competitors—in fact, we are enemies.”

“Even so, perhaps Chihiro is right,” mused Celeste. “After all, adaptation—” she began in her usual mantra, but she was cut off before she had the chance.

“Who said anything about adapting?” said Byakuya. “It’s a game, and I’ll treat it as such. It’s so much more fun that way.” His face twisted in a sickening grin. I couldn’t believe he was enjoying this. “Besides,” he added, his tune shifting and even his usual look of disdain couldn’t describe the contempt in his eyes as he looked at Chihiro, “win or lose, what could the Ultimate Affluent Progeny possibly know about loss?”

“What?” Chihiro’s eyes were wide.

“I must admit,” said Celeste, “the very name of Fujisaki Corp. evokes victory. I think our twee little programmer here is simply pointing out that your success is built on the very foundation of defeat.”

“‘Twee little programmer’?” said Byakuya, but Celeste ignored him.

“What do you—” asked Chihiro, but Celeste continued.

“How do you think such corporations came into being?” asked Celeste. “How do you think they became world superpowers? Surely you can’t be so naive.”

Byakuya was again dismissive. “Please. How could she possibly understand? What even is failure to an heir who has been handed everything she could possibly ask for? How could you possibly
understand true victory without struggle?"

Chihiro’s eyes began to well up. "I—that’s not…"

“I don’t know how someone as weak as you has lasted this long,” said Byakuya.

“Hey!” said Mondo. “Cut that shit out! Haven’t we told you enough times to keep your damn mouth shut?” It was a question, but he bellowed it so loud that it sounded otherwise.

“I see, you’re still playing at being friends,” said Byakuya. "Very well, that is how you feel, but I see no need in indulging in your delusions. She is not your friend. She voted for Sakura, just as you all did."

“But I—” began Chihiro.

“Oh, lay off,” said Leon. “We’re not masochists. Sometimes, you just gotta choose between the lesser of two evils, ya know?”

“Exactly,” said Sayaka, “It isn’t right to sit around blaming ourselves, and we’re done placing blame on others. Isn’t that right, Makoto?”

“Absolutely!” said Makoto. “Chihiro isn’t to blame, neither is Sakura or Hifumi! This is all the Mastermind’s doing!”

“Mastermind or not, we’ve been placed in a situation in which we are pitted against one another,” said Byakuya. “The sooner you accept that, the better off you will be.” He shook his head, as if disgusted with himself. “And here I am, trying to rationalize with my competition.”

“I-I’m sorry,” said Chihiro, her eyes full of tears. She fell to her knees, her face buried in her hands. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I-It’s hopeless,” she blubbered out. “I just—"

“Chihiro!” Sayaka was at her side, crouching to put out a reassuring arm, but Chihiro flinched away. Upon realizing that Chihiro was being unreceptive to her help, she backed off.

“Kid! Come on, don’t let him get to you like that.” For once, Mondo’s tone was surprisingly gentle. That was gone in an instant. When Chihiro didn’t let up, Mondo turned to Byakuya. He was seething. “Quit picking on her just because she can’t fight back! Fuck you, asshole!”

“Mondo! Please, think! Do not do anything rash!” said Taka.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do!”

“Spoken with the eloquence of a bratty child,” muttered Junko.

“Mondo, I understand that you’re mad, but please try to calm down!” said Makoto.

And to my continued surprise, ever brave Makoto stepped in between Mondo’s rage and someone else.

“I am calm!” he said, still approaching Byakuya, but with Makoto in between he could do little. Thankfully, this time he didn’t take his anger out on Makoto instead. Well, at the very least, he didn’t punch him again. Rather, he shoved Makoto out of the way, but other than that, he at least calmed down enough that he didn’t try to snap Byakuya in half.
With a painful sounding thud, Makoto fell onto the floor.

Byakuya scoffed, completely unperturbed by Mondo’s targeted anger. “Please, by all means, continue to keep this up. You all thought Hina was your friend, didn’t you? And instead she tried to get you all executed. That’s exactly where this foolish belief will lead you.”

The eyes in the room turned to Hina, which on the one hand meant Mondo was sufficiently distracted, but now meant that Hina was under heavy scrutiny. She looked pretty close to tears.

“I—I didn’t mean...” began Hina, but she was unable to finish her thought.

It was the second time he’d lashed out at Hina. Noticing Hina beginning to shrink back again, Sayaka put a comforting hand on Hina’s shoulder.

“Well, yes, but…” said Sayaka, frowning. “We forgive her. She’s making amends.”

“If you were smart you would leave her to fend for herself.”

“Do not berate the poor girl, Byakuya. This must all come as a shock to her,” said Celeste. “As I was saying, we must simply learn to co-exist. Therefore, we will no longer need to compete.”

I was always so taken with Celeste. I couldn’t read the damn girl. At times she seemed sympathetic to others, and at other times she seemed completely devoid of emotion or care.

“But why would I want to stop competing?” said Byakuya. “It’s everyone else who needs to step their game up. The competition is no fun without active participants.”

“I will say,” said Kyoko, who almost seemed to emerge from the shadows as she spoke. “If you plan on winning, provoking your competition by being as intentionally aggravating toward them as possible is certainly an… interesting self-preservation technique.”

My lip twitched in a small smirk.

“What?” said Byakuya. “‘Intentionally aggravating’?”

Kyoko didn’t answer.

Junko spoke up, intentionally ignoring him. “Oh, but I so much liked the sound of ‘twee little programmer’,” said Junko with a sigh. “I do so wish I’d come up with that one myself,” she said to Celeste. Turning to Byakuya, she added sharply, “All the same, what makes you so sure you won’t be next?”

“I won’t die. It is simply a fact.” He turned to go. “I am through. If anyone still needs further clarification, do not expect me at our ‘friendly’ group meals. Someone could easily poison our food. Continuing to indulge my competition is a waste of time, and I hate wasting my time.”

Once he was gone, I made my way over to Makoto—who was still on the floor—and offered a hand to help him up. “You good?”

“Oh. Y-yeah,” he said. He took my hand, grunting as he struggled to lift himself up.

“Are you alright, Makoto?” asked Sayaka immediately.

He blushed. “Y-yes, I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Watching the door, Hina sighed. “It’s no use. And Byakuya calls us deluded?”
“I’d love to know what’s got him so sure of himself,” huffed Junko.

“Pretty much we can just chalk it up to simple arrogance, man,” said Hiro.

Junko scowled. “You wear embroidered coats and gold-plated shoes!” she said in disbelief.

“Hey!” Hiro pointed a finger indignantly. “Why am I always the one getting picked on? Byakuya just said this was a game, does that not trigger anyone else’s alarm bells?”

“Besides,” I jumped in, “didn’t you say it yourself? ‘Vanity is great and all, but nothing beats good old-fashioned egotism’.”

Junko smirked, relenting. “Okay, yeah that was pretty good.” She sighed. “Alright, I get it. Whatever, it’s just him and his unusually inflated ego. Death ‘doesn’t compute’ or whatever.” She made finger quotes. "And... you’re right." She sighed. "My bullshit alarm has been going off since day one."

“He is one that speaks as though he knows little of failure,” said Celeste, also looking to the now empty doorway.

“More like he’s one who speaks as though he’s never had a normal conversation with a human before,” grumbled Junko.

“B-but... he has a point.”

We all turned to see Toko, hunched and shaking her head as usual.

“Toko?” asked Hina. “Come on, what are you saying?”

Toko grimaced at Hina. Out of everyone left, Toko had definitely been one of the slowest to re-integrating Hina back into the dynamic with no trouble. “Ugh. Y-you couldn’t p-possibly understand, could you? Y-you—you treacherous bitch, you nearly g-got us all killed! B-Byakuya, h-he’s right, we d-don’t—don’t know who is going to strike next. F-for all we—all we know, someone could poison our food.”

“Come on,” said Junko. “Forget what he said. This kind of worrying is totally bad for your skin.”

“Yeah, seriously,” said Leon. “Fuck him.”

“I don’t w-want advice from a slut like you!” said Toko to Junko.

Junko glared at her. She looked as if she were about to retort, but Toko continued before she could.

“W-why would you ever bother helping s-someone as—as ugly enough as me? You d-don’t care about my skin. You w-wouldn’t even c-care if I—if I—if I was—was the next one to go!”

“Toko,” said Sayaka, and once again she moved to comfort, but Toko just backed away. “No one said that.”

“B-but you’re thinking it!” cried Toko. “There, I can—I can s-see it in your eyes! You don’t want me here! You all th-think I’m—I’m some filthy disgusting creature!” She began to pull at her hair, voice rising.

I had this sick feeling in my gut. I didn’t know where it was coming from. Perhaps it was from listening to Toko talk about herself, perhaps it was hearing Toko’s comments toward Junko, but I couldn’t fathom why I was so upset.
“Please,” reasoned Makoto. “Toko, no one thinks you’re disgusting.”

For once, I couldn’t tell if it was something said in earnest, or if it was something more performative. He was usually so patient, and this continued to be the case, but there was an uncharacteristic false note.

Then again, did my suspicion make me any different from Toko? I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know how.

“D-don’t be ridiculous,” said Toko. “Y-you all—you all hate me! You wish I was gone! Even if you don’t—don’t know it yet, you will, just wait!”

“Toko, wait!” said Makoto.

She ran off, and from what I could tell she was holding back tears. The twisted feeling in my stomach did not subside, but it was now accompanied by guilt for simply watching her leave.

“There is nothing to be done,” said Celeste, and as she spoke eye turned away from the door and to her. She smiled. “Just let her be. When she gets this way, she is beyond hope.”

I grimaced, the sick feeling in my stomach twisting even tighter, but I stayed silent nonetheless.

“I—I don’t like it,” said Sayaka, as though voicing my thoughts aloud once more. “Shouldn’t someone go talk to her?”

Leon shook his head. “By all means, feel free, but I’m so done dealing with crazies.”

Sayaka frowned, brow furrowed in contemplation.

Junko shrugged. “Eh, who needs Byakuya, anyway?” she said. “It’s not like he was cooperative or pleasant when he was around.”

“Are you alright, Hina?” asked Sayaka as she looked to her. “I know he was kind of hard on you.”

“I’m okay,” said Hina. She and Taka were in the process of helping of helping Chihiro to her feet. “I mean… I didn’t get the worst of it.” She glanced at Chihiro as she said this, before adding, “Nothing a few donuts can’t solve, right?”

Sayaka smiled. “That’s the spirit. And you, Chihiro?”

Chihiro looked up. “Hm?” Oh… I… I’ll be okay.”

“Well, I think it’s about time we headed back down to breakfast,” said Hina. “What do you say, Chihiro, why don’t you and I split some donuts? Maybe that’ll make you feel better.”

“You and your donuts,” mumbled Hiro, shaking his head.

Hina ignored him.

Chihiro managed a small smile. “That would be good, I think.”

“See?” Sayaka’s returning smile was bright. “Better already!”

Slowly, we all filtered out of the library and back downstairs. Ultimately, our breakfast meeting came to an end without answering any questions. Everyone headed back to their rooms…
With much time left in the day, I was left to wander the school.

Itching for something, anything, to entertain, I came across Kyoko in the girls locker room.

“Hello, Kyoko,” I said upon entering the room.

She let go of the pull-up bars, nodding to me in return.

“It’s good to see you,” I added.

Kyoko took a swig from a water bottle sitting on a nearby bench, shooting me a quizzical look. “If you’re looking to be entertained, it is probably best to be on your way,” she said in her usual manner, but her voice was just noticeably breathless.

She’d worked up quite a sweat.

“What?” I asked, taken aback.

She didn’t answer, perhaps because she was breathing heavily, and instead sat down on the bench, grabbing a towel sitting beside her and wiping her forehead. She hadn’t been wearing her usual gloves, but she quickly wiped her hands and slipped them back on before I could get a good look at her hands.

Realizing that I was staring, I shook my head as if to clear my thoughts, hastily trying to find something to say. “Oh, no! I-I was just—”

She shrugged, ignoring my incoherent stammering as she glanced at the clock. “However, I am taking a break for the moment. So I suppose I have the time. Is there something you wish to tell me?”

I shook my head. “N-no, nothing in particular.”

“Hm… Then what brings you here?”

“Just looking for a way to pass the time.”

“With… me?” She hesitated to meet my eye.

I shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant, but I could feel my face grow warm. Just then, I remembered the bag I kept on my person. It kept random junk I’d taken from the gift shop. Most of the stuff was admittedly of no use to me, but I’d grabbed it nonetheless. As shameful as it was, I could be a bit of a hoarder. But perhaps all the loot I’d nicked could be enjoyed by others.

“Uh…” I dug through my bag, grabbing a box I thought looked promising and offered it to her. “Do you like coffee?”

“For me?”

“Yeah, I, uh… found it in the giftshop.” While I definitely was a bit of a caffeine fiend, Luwak coffee was way more expensive than my typical price range. I’d certainly never tasted it, but that meant it would be all the nicer for a gift.

She took it gingerly from me, examining it. “How did you know I was interested in this?”

I shrugged again.

On her lips, the barest trace of a smile. “Very well. You’re an enigma, Mukuro Ikusaba.” She looked at me expectantly, patting the empty seat beside her on the bench.

“Oh. Hah, thanks...” My ears were burning. I was surprised she’d changed her tune so quickly. I sat down next to her, staring at my feet so as to avoid looking at her, and swinging my legs just a little.

“You wish to converse?” She was watching me.

“I—I suppose. It’s not necessary, but—”

“Why? Are you here to psychoanalyze me?” She eyed me shrewdly.

My head was spinning. Just a moment ago, she’d almost seemed happy to see me, but now she was back to that icy demeanor. “What? No, I—”

“Is that your strategy, Ultimate Detective?” she asked me. “Are you trying to scope out information on the competition?”

“I... And what if I am?” I challenged, pulling myself together and changing tactics. “Does that scare you? I think the Ultimate Soldier could take me in a fight.” I laughed weakly at my non-joke.

She didn’t laugh, but rather looked away. “It is natural to feel fear. It keeps you on your toes. It means your imagination is working.”

“Hm. I thought the super-soldier would be over fear,” I mused. “You never seem scared in the slightest.”

*Well, she never seemed scared... except yesterday when we came across the letter in the library.*

“Of course, I am afraid. But to show it would be to expose weakness. I thought you of all people would understand.”

“Me, of all people?”

“You just... seem like the kind of person who can see beyond outward appearances.”

I thought about it. “Well, reading people is... kinda part of the job.”

“And you’re good at only letting people see what you want them to see,” said Kyoko.

I didn’t see what she was getting at, but I didn’t protest. I wanted to say the same to her. Out of all the students here, she was particularly difficult to read.

“However...” She paused. “You still have a weak link.”

“I do?”

She nodded. “Your protective nature for your sister. You are not as...” She pondered the right choice of words, *foolishly open* as some of the others, but if you do not learn to keep those emotions in check, they will soon become your weakness.”

I scowled. “I’m just looking out for her.”

“You don’t want to lose her.” It was a statement, not a question.
“Of course!”

“And that is your fear. Fear of what you might lose.”

“I don’t understand. Isn’t there someone or something you would be afraid to lose? Am I not supposed to care for my sister?”

She nodded serenely. “I understand, Mukuro. I have lost as well. Just… be careful. I would hate for someone to take advantage of your weakness.”

What was that supposed to mean? Was it supposed to be a warning? And a warning for what? Or for who?

I hugged my arms close to my chest. “I think people are more afraid of me than anything.”

It was more than I wanted to admit. Forcing myself to remain composed, I pushed thoughts of the night of Sakura’s trial out of my mind. My anger. The shocked look on everyone’s faces. It was more than I could bear. Surely, they all thought differently now.

“That is exactly why you ought to be careful.” She paused again, and we sat in silence for a moment. “Are you afraid?”

I frowned. “I already answered that.”

“Of me?”

I hesitated. “No.” I dared a glance at her. “Should I be?” My breath hitched as our eyes met.

Was it just my imagination, or did we seem to be getting closer?

“I’m afraid that’s for you to decide. I won’t tell you how to feel.”

For who knows how long we just sat there, locking eyes until a click and the sound of an oh too familiar voice brought us back.

“Hey, ‘Kuro! Hiro told me you were up here, and he said he wanted someone to play cards with, but I figured screw that, I’ve just been dying for someone to braid hair with, and I know, I know, you’re hair is short, but I was thinking—oh, hey Kyoko! Didn’t see you there.” Junko grinned, waiting for me in the doorway.

Upon hearing her come in, I cleared my throat, scooting away from Kyoko just a touch.

Kyoko didn’t respond to Junko. Rather, she stood up, brushing herself off and slinging her towel over her shoulder. “I should get going.”

“Already?” I asked.

She headed for the door. “I will not further occupy your time, since it seems you are in such high demand. Besides,” she turned back to me, lip twitching ever so slightly in a crooked smile, “you’re not the only one with an air of mystery to maintain.”

She left me in the locker room with Junko, sitting there dumbfounded and awestruck.

Junko looked to me, to where Kyoko had just passed through in the doorway, and then back to me. “Did she just… What the hell was that?”
I stared blankly at the wall. “I have no idea,” I whispered.

—

“Well, this is certainly a new look for you, Mukuro,” said Celeste as I entered the kitchen, a small smile playing on her lips as she took a look at me.

“It’s my sister’s doing,” I muttered, turning away from her and opening up the fridge in hopes of finding a snack. I’d paid my dues to society and allowed myself to be Junko’s guinea pig. Now, I was hungry.

“Of course,” she said, her smile unfaltering.

I did my best to ignore her stares and quiet giggles. The pigtails were certainly a bit juvenile, but I certainly couldn’t undo all the hard work my sister had put into them, could I? What kind of monster would I have been?

“What’re you looking for?” I asked, more so out of politeness than any real desire to keep the conversation going. I’d rather be out of there than get roped into a full on talk with the Mistress of the Undead.

She sighed. “Oh, I was hoping perhaps to find tea for later, but I don’t know if anything here is to my taste.”

I recalled seeing something in the gift shop that might’ve been the answer. “Hm…” I fumbled through my bag, finally spotting what I was looking for and grabbing a box and tossing it to her.

She caught it, eyes wide in surprise.

“Rose hip tea,” I explained. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

She turned it over in her carefully manicured fingers. “You wish to give this to me?”

“Uh… Yeah.” I shrugged sheepishly. “Call it an apology.”

“For?”

“For… snapping at you the other day.”

For a moment, she stood there, impassive. Then, she smiled. “There is nothing to be done. The past is in the past.” She examined her gift once more. “Interesting!” She looked up at me again, and for once her smile seemed genuine. “The gods heard my prayer, and my wish has been granted!”

Certainly dramatic, but her thanks did not go unappreciated. Perhaps praying to the gods had something to do with her whole fortune teller deal.

“Hmhmhm,” she said, sounding self-satisfied. “This is all because of my daily sympathy and compassion, is it not?”

I snorted. “Uh… Sure.” I closed the fridge, unsatisfied and instead just grabbed an apple from the stockpile and began to head out, but before I could, Celeste spoke.

“Would you like some company? I’d be happy to grace you with my presence.”

I nodded slowly, not sure what was could’ve been in it for her. If there was one thing I felt pretty sure of, it was that Celeste did not extend herself without expecting something in return.
Furthermore, I was still wary. Yes, she had accepted my earlier apology, but I didn’t know what she got out of spending further time with me.

She smiled. “Please, relax. I am merely wishing to amuse myself. If you must know, it is a step up from being pestered by… certain individuals.”

“Oh…okay…”

I was a little ansty. I supposed I had no reason to be, just my basest instincts were very unnerved by Celeste. But I complied. Perhaps I had been too hasty to judge her. This was an opportunity to gain a more nuanced perspective.

We left the kitchen, sitting ourselves at one of the smaller two-seater cafeteria tables.

“Are you sure?” I asked, still offering her an out. A small part of me wanted her to take it so that I could book it. “It’s just an apple, I can take it back to my room—”

“It is quite alright,” she said. “I doubt you would be any more tiresome than the others.”

Well, alright then.

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” I joked. When she merely shot me a questioning look in response, I sighed.

“Well,” said Celeste, ignoring my comment and moving forward. “In return for your thoughtful gift, you may ask me a question. I’m certain you must be curious about something.”

“Wait, you mean like a fortune?”

She laughed. “You are quite the joker, Mukuro.”

I didn’t see what was so funny, but she continued.

“Really, very hilarious, but no. I don’t sell my talents for free…” She thought it over. “Then again, you did give me that tea as payment. And I am certain that us meeting is no mere coincidence. I can give you a discount. Care to take a crack at it?”

It was certainly enticing, but I didn’t have that kind of money. “I’m okay. But if you’re still open for questions, can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” said Celeste.

“How does your fortune-telling actually work?” I asked, unable to help myself. “You went into it a little bit during the trial, but I’m still a bit… hazy on the details.”

She’d gone on this whole explanation on the performative aspect of her talent, but in the end I was still disbelieving. I didn’t know what to think. Was she telling the truth, and the pageantry was her just fulfilling her customers wishes, or was there something more sinister involved?

I was dying to know, but also more than a little scared to ask. I was already beginning to regret my decision.

“Well, normally I would not disclose my trade secrets,” said Celeste. “But since you asked so politely, I will tell you. I use several methods with my divination tools, including tarot and my crystal ball. Of course, to be in the business and become as successful as I am, you have to have a talent for correctly reading your divination tools. In that way, you can correctly interpret the messages from the
powers from beyond. Are you following?"

“Yes…” I nodded slowly, trying to absorb it all.

“Of course, skill and talent are important, but there is one power in particular that comes to aid me that can trump any skill.”

“I see…”

“My power… is luck.”

I blinked. “Luck?”

“Yes. Don’t you see? That is why the success rate for my fortunes is unbeatable. Because you can have all the skill in the world, but in the end, I have been granted the gift of luck. And with luck, I will never fail.”

“So after all this, you just rely on your luck? That’s all there is to it?”

“Do not misunderstand me, Mukuro,” said Celeste. “I do not rely on simple guesswork or trickery. My clients come to me for results, and thus far, that is what they have gotten. Most fortune tellers don’t have nearly as high a success rate as myself. Good luck is, in itself, a kind of supernatural force, a blessing. It is a power beyond human understanding.” She paused. “And I hope that clears things up for the nay-sayers.”

I was speechless.

“If truth be told, a part of me is curious to find someone in this school whose luck can challenge my own. Perhaps the gambler? Or the Ultimate Lucky Student?” She hummed in satisfaction to herself. “Hmhm. Well, if that is all you wish to ask, have a nice day, Mukuro. Thank you for the tea. If you wish to know your future, just remember that I am always here for you.” She smiled once more, the ruffles on her dress swishing and jewelry clinking as she rose to her feet.

Without another word, Celeste quietly disappeared.

—

“It’s awfully quiet today,” said Sayaka, looking around the dining hall from her seat at the big table.

“I know… It feels so empty,” said Makoto.

He’d chosen a seat across from her. Generally, we had no problems doing our own thing, but for breakfast we were still keeping up the practice of all sitting at the big table. It was easy to tell who was missing. Unsurprisingly, Byakuya was absent, but Toko had failed to show up after storming out of the library yesterday. And the other absence that was even more surprising than Toko—who’d always been a touch paranoid—was Hina.

“Naturally,” said Celeste from her end of the table, not looking up as she sipped her milk tea. “Two people are dead and three are abstaining.” She said it so casually.

“Well, I mean let’s be real, Byakuya is a lost cause,” said Junko. “So I don’t know how much we oughtta worry about him. But what about Toko and Hina?” She looked across to me, and then to the others as if to ask them the same question.

There were some shrugs. Sayaka spoke.
“Um… Do you think we should go check on them?” she asked.

“Fuck that,” said Leon. “Toko gives me serious creep vibes, and Hina—”

Sayaka interrupted, ignoring him and continuing her train of thought. “Well, I’m gonna go see if they’re okay. Someone ought to.”

They weren’t sitting next to each other like usual.

Hiro grimaced. “Ah, I don’t know ‘bout that. Hina's kinda... Maybe you should—”

Junko scoffed. “Seriously? Are you really following the lead of Toko and Byakuya?”

Celeste shook her head. “Hiro, you have no spine.”

“That is factually incorrect!” said Taka. “It is clearly evident that Hiro has a spine!” When making a statement, he tended to point it out literally with his finger.

“What hell are talking about?” said Mondo. “Goddamn, you idiot, that’s not what she means!”

“Idiot?” gasped Taka. “You’re an idiot!”

“You—”

Before it would escalate any further, Junko interrupted. “Oh my god, cool it!” she groaned, rubbing her temples. “All Morticia is saying is that it might not be best idea to take social cues from the paranoid slut-shamer and the antisocial internet troll. Personally, I’m inclined to agree. Look, I’ll admit, I’m still a little,” she shifted uncomfortably, “peeved about what Toko said to me the other day, but,” she paused dramatically, “I’ll let it slide.”

“How very gracious, your majesty,” I said, rolling my eyes.

I felt a sharp pain in my ankle as she kicked me under the table. I winced, but remained silent.

“I still think we should check up on them,” said Sayaka. “Hina at least. Byakuya was pretty hard on her.”

“Well, sure, but that’s just him being his usual self, don’tcha think?” said Leon. “You don’t think he’d try anything, would he?” he asked, forced grin twitching like it usually did when he was visibly anxious. “I mean, that’s just crazytalk.”

“Nah, that guy is up to something,” said Mondo. “He’s acting super shady and shit. I don’t like it. We gotta do something about it! Tie him up or something!”

“Whoa, hey man, I wasn’t saying—”

I tuned them out, and instead noticed that Chihiro had gotten up to leave and was wiping at her eyes.

“Are you alright, Chihiro?” I asked.

Chihiro stopped when I called to her. She sniffed, standing there small and glum. “I’m fine. I’m just —never mind, it’s not important.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m just… going through something,” said Chihiro. “Byakuya said some things to me
yesterday that kinda got to me. And I couldn’t even defend myself. Mondo had to step in, and even he said I was someone who couldn’t fight back. I… I’m so helpless and weak. I just don’t know if... I deserve to be here.”

“What?” cried Sayaka, astounded. She was by Chihiro’s side in an instant. “Of course, you deserve to be here!”

“Well... Define 'here','” said Junko. ”'Cause Hope's Peak, yes. Murder school, not so much.”

“I see,” said Taka, ignoring Junko and looking to be in deep thought. “So it is Mondo who has upset you.”

“Me?” said Mondo. “What the hell did I do?”

“Uh, hello? You made her feel bad!” said Junko, tapping her skull. When she got blank looks in return, she extrapolated. “You called her weak. That’s not cool.”

“Well, yeah! But I mean…” he floundered helplessly for words, “Girls are naturally weak, right? I didn’t mean anything by it!”

“'Naturally weak’?” asked Kyoko sharply.

“Agh!” Mondo groaned, rubbing his forehead with one hand. “I didn’t mean—Fuck, forget it.”

Chihiro sniffed again, hiccuping and wiping the tears and snot with her cardigan sleeve.

“Augh…” Mondo approached her, shifting uncomfortably. Look,” he began, “don’t cry anymore, alright? I swear, I won’t yell at ya anymore. I’ll make you a promise as a man.”

Chihiro looked up at him. “Promise… as a man?”

“Yeah, I mean,” said Mondo, “Ever since I was a kid, my brother always told me that no matter what, a real man always keeps his promises.” He sighed. “Anyway, I don’t wanna… go into it, it’s not something that’s easy for me to talk about. A promise is a promise, and I won't yell at ya. You can hold me to that. Just know you don’t gotta cry anymore.”

He offered her an encouraging smile, but there was something... morose about his demeanor. Or perhaps it had been the shakiness of the sigh, and how hard it had seemed for him to get the words out.

However, the words seemed to console her. Chihiro smiled at him in return. “Thank you, Mondo.”

He mumbled something, blushing slightly.

“Aw, babe, there’s that smile,” said Junko, and Chihiro giggled.

“Thank you, Mondo,” said Chihiro again, “that’s very good of you.”

Mondo looked away. “Don’t mention it.”

“You should come with us to go for a swim!” said Sayaka. “That’ll cheer you up for sure. Leon is coming. Aren’t you Leon?” It was much sharper than her usual tone as she looked over at him “In fact, a bunch of us are coming. The more the merrier, I say.”

“Hang on a sec,” said Leon, “when did we agree—”
“That sounds like a great idea!” interrupted Junko loudly, giving me a look.

I nodded. “Yes,” I said equally as forcefully, meeting Junko’s eyes. “I agree. I will go with you.”

Chihiro hesitated. “Oh, I don’t know…. It’s just... I’m not a very good swimmer.”

“It’s ok, neither am I,” said Sayaka. “Come on! It’ll be fun!”

“Well... Not now, but m—” said Chihiro.

“Maybe next time?” asked Sayaka, finishing her thought. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Chihiro beamed. “Thank you, everybody. I’m feeling much better now.”

—

“Mukuro, can I ask you a question?” asked Sayaka, brushing her wet hair back from her face and swimming the edge of the pool's shallow end where I was sitting.

I was wary. “Okay, shoot.”

Sayaka edged nearer to me, resting her arms on the pool deck and looking up at me with her big blue eyes.

“I don’t know, it's kind of a weird question…” Sayaka paused as if considering whether to really go through with it. Was she blushing? “Do you have a boyfriend?”

I blinked. “Do I what?”

She looked away. “See, I knew it was a silly question.”

“Oh, n-no, that wasn’t what I—” My face grew warm as I stammered for something to say. “I mean…”

“No, it was too personal, I understand. I just thought I’d ask. I… I was curious.”

“It’s no problem, don’t worry about it.”

“It was silly, of course someone as cool as you would have a boyfriend.”

Cool?

“Yeah, cool! I mean, you’re so smart!” said Sayaka, as if she’d read my mind, and I flushed even deeper at the compliment. “Remember when we were sent to get Hina the other day? I haven’t forgotten our conversation. You know…” she mused, “it’s too bad we don’t talk much. We should fix that, Mukuro. You’re a good friend. We are friends, right?”

“Of course!” I said, face still burning.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“And for the record,” I added. “I don’t have a boyfriend. I figured the psychic might be able to guess that.”

Sayaka giggled. “I guess, but I just thought I’d ask. Even if it is probably silly to be thinking about crushes at a time like this.” She glanced over at the group of our classmates sitting poolside together,
smiling fondly. I followed her line of sight to see Junko chatting animatedly with Hina, Leon, and Makoto, who were listening along.

For a moment we didn’t speak, we just sat there together watching the others. Then, Sayaka shook her head. “I don’t remember how long it’s been since I’ve had close friends.”

“Does your modeling career keep you busy?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, it can be kind of lonely. I mean, yes, I get people clamoring to know me and be my friend, but I never feel like anyone really wants to know me. Does that make any sense?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

I mean, I couldn’t relate, but I understood it enough. Nobody cared enough about me to pretend to be my friend. What would be the perks of being friends with a detective anyway?

Her usual cheerful demeanor faltered for just a moment, but her frown was quickly replaced with her familiar chipper smile. Perhaps she felt my eyes on her. “Which of course means no boyfriend on my end of things either!” She shrugged. “I just don’t know if I’m at a point in my life where I can deal with that sort of thing. I imagine it’s the same for you? You must be busy—as the Ultimate Detective and all.”

I thought about it. “I… suppose.”

Anytime the subject was breached in conversation, I’d always made the same lame joke about being “married to my career”, but maybe she was right.

“But there has to be someone you’re interested in!” she prompted earnestly.

I clammed up. “I dunno.”

Talking about all this stuff was always alright in the abstract, but I wasn’t keen on going into details. Or perhaps lack of details. What prospects did I really have here? What prospects have I ever really had at all?

“Oh, come on, Mukuro! We’re friends, right?”

I grimaced. “What’s with the third degree? I thought investigating was my thing.”

“You did say I’d make a good assistant. Tell me, there has to be someone.”

“I… I guess,” I said, but that was all I was willing to relent. I didn’t say anything else. I wanted this conversation to be over.

It was a moment before I realized Sayaka was staring intently at me. “So… aren’t you going to ask me?”

Her blue eyes were piercing, voice low.

“I… what?” I asked, mesmerized. Even after swimming, hair dripping and face bare of any makeup, she looked absolutely gorgeous.

God, she was stunning.

“Ask me if there’s someone I’m interested in.”
My ears were burning. “R-right.”

“That’s how it works, right?” asked Sayaka. “You’re supposed to tell each other these kinds of things? I—I’ve never really had girl friends my own age before.”

Before I could say any more, we were interrupted by the sound of a screech and a loud splash. Turning to see what had caused the commotion, it soon became clear to both of us that Junko was the one screaming, for Hina and Leon had just pushed her into the pool.

“I’m going to kill you!” shrieked Junko indignantly, to which they only laughed.

Makoto, who had escaped torment from the other two, stifled a laugh behind his hand. However, upon seeing Junko’s expression, he said, “Uh, guys, that’s not very—”

“Shut up, Makoto!” said Junko. “Don’t tell me you didn’t see this coming! You’re an accessory to the crime.” She grumbled something under her breath before calling out to me. “Ugh! Mukuro! ‘Kuro, help me out, will you? Get me a towel or something, I’m totally drenched.”

“I… I’d better help her out,” I murmured to Sayaka.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” she said, backing off a bit and treading in the shallow water.

“Mukuro!” called Junko again. “Mukuro!”

“That’s my cue.” I sighed.

Junko shrieked again as she proceeded to get splashed once more. “Cut it out! Mukuro, get over here!”

I chuckled. I couldn’t help it. “Sure thing, sis.” I stood up, quickly scurrying off to grab a towel from the stack sitting on the nearby bleachers and handing it to her.

Junko was too busy bemoaning her poor lot in life, and the others were too busy laughing, that I hadn’t noticed Sayaka approach me. I hadn’t even realized she’d climbed out of the pool.

“The answer is yes, by the way.”

“What?” I asked.

She was drying her hair with the towel, not looking at me, but she couldn’t have been speaking to anyone else. “Yes. To answer the question you didn’t ask,” she clarified, although I was still a little mystified. “There is someone.” Once again, she looked over at the group of students. Hina waved her over, Leon flashed a cheesy grin, Makoto flushed a light shade of pink. Sayaka then looked back to me. “It’s probably silly to think about that sort of thing, considering our predicament.”

I was still watching the others. They looked so happy and carefree—a moment of levity in a dreadful situation.

“It’s not silly to have feelings.”

“Thank you. You are always so kind, Mukuro.”

“Not as kind as you,” I murmured. Sayaka was always the first to rush to someone’s side, or provide a word of comfort. It was amazing. She was so pure of intention. When she looked as though she were about to protest, I added, “It’s true. Everyone loves you. You—you stuck up for Hina when everyone else wanted to turn her away. You got her to come here, cheered her up. That was all you.”
“Oh, stop it,” said Sayaka, shaking her head, but she blushed happily with a small smile on her delicate lips. She looked to me again. “Mukuro?”

“Yes?” I asked, and our eyes met.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked, voice now surprisingly earnest.

“You just did.”

“Okay, but really.”

I paused. “Of course. Anything.”

“This someone I’m interested in. Should I tell this person that I have feelings for them?”

I felt a lump in my throat. “What? I—”

“I thought it might be silly to mention it, but you saying otherwise—your words have really given me strength! I know now might not be the right time, but what the hell is the right time, anyway? It might be the only time I get the chance! What with life here...”

“I see.”

“I mean, if you care about someone, you should let them know any way you can, right?”

“Yeah... I—yeah. You should go for it. I’m... happy for you.”

“You are so sweet!”

“But why are you asking me? I... don’t matter.”

“Because I trust you!” said Sayaka, as though it should’ve been obvious.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes! Of course. You’re... You’re a really good friend.”

“I see. Is that what you think?”

“Of course that’s what I think! But what do you think?” Sayaka looked at me expectantly. “I... I don’t want to embarrass myself... What if I get rejected?”

“I... think that whoever it is... would be lucky to have you. I mean, everyone loves you. Who wouldn’t want y—I mean, I’m sure they feel the same way.”

It was the truth.

“You mean it?”

I nodded.

She beamed. “Oh, my goodness, you are so sweet I can practically feel the toothache coming in.”

“You don’t have to keep saying it...”

Sayaka pulled me into a slightly damp hug. “But I do! Thank you so much!” Letting go of me, she looked me up and down, letting out an embarrassed laugh and tucking her hair behind her ear.
“Sorry about that.”

“S’fine,” I mumbled, my hand covering my mouth.

“Thank you so much, Mukuro. I wasn't sure what to do, but now that I've talked to you, you've helped me make up my mind. Now I know I'm making the right decision. I was so scared to talk to you about this, but I'm so glad I did.” She took a deep breath. "Now I just have to go ahead and say it."

“Of course. You and... and Leon would be great together.”

“I... What? Leon?” She laughed. Loudly. “You think I have feelings for—for Leon?”

I blinked. “But I thought—"

“Oh, Mukuro, you must have quite the imagination!” said Sayaka. Which was odd, because I personally didn’t find it so wild of a conclusion. They really did seem thick as thieves. “It’s... not Leon.” She said, not looking at me. “Definitely not.”

I shot her a quizzical look.

“Leon has been very nice,” she added. “But we’re just friends. He’s... a good friend. But he—”

Sayaka glanced other at him, and I followed her line of sight. He was still chatting with Junko who to my surprise didn’t look completely bothered at all. He must’ve made a joke because she laughed, giving him a playful shove. The kind a girl does when she wants to casually touch someone. I didn’t know much about flirting, but I knew that much.

Sayaka cleared her throat, quickly looking away before the two of them could spot us. She continued, “Yeah. He’s, uh... He’s great, but. But I... I don’t know if we’re a good idea. I value his friendship too much to...”

It was almost too small to notice, but when Sayaka was upset she would develop a little crinkle between her eyebrows, and a small line on the bridge of her nose, almost like a little frown. She was smiling, as usual, but it was the little details that gave her away.

"Besides. There's someone else."

Someone else?

Then she sighed, brushing her hair back and glancing away, as if trying to lighten the air. "Well, it's your turn."

"My turn?" I asked, surprised by the abrupt change.

"Yes." She was still avoiding my eyes. "I mean, I told you everything, so."

Sayaka finally glanced back at me, her expression expectant.

"I..."

I couldn't do it.

"I told you, already. There's no one."

"Oh. I see."
Once again, her eyes were unreadable.

"Yep," I said.

"I could've sworn..." said Sayaka. She shook her head. "Never mind."

"But, uh," I said, "You still haven't told me anything."

"Huh?"

I didn't want to entertain the idea of this mystery person.

*I mean, it if wasn’t Leon, then who—*

“Right. It’s. Uh… It’s Makoto.” she said, as if she could read my thoughts. “Of course.”

“M-Makoto?”

She’d avoided my eyes as she’d said it, looking away and scratching the back of her neck.

But upon seeing my newfound interest, she seemed to have responded with newfound enthusiasm, however forced.

“Yes! I’ll admit, I thought he was kind of a pushover at first, but I’ve been starting to see him in a whole new light. We’ve been spending more time together. He’s so... kind! He always checks on me to see how I’m doing.”

“Yes, Makoto is a very thoughtful person…” I said, but my voice was hollow.

“He is,” she said with a sigh. “You know what I like about—about Makoto?” She said it very pointedly. "I feel like he really sees me as a person, you know? Not an object. I—that’s never really happened to me before.”

Her smile was fond. Looking over again, Makoto was grabbing a towel for Junko. He really was very sweet.

I didn’t know what to say. “I—I, um...”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“But you were going to, right?”

I shook my head, ignoring her usual creepy intuition thing. “I—I don’t know. It’s just… unexpected. It’s nothing. I guess—I just. You and Makoto.” I fidgeted around, wringing my hands before looking back up at her again. The words tumbled out in a rush. “Do you really think you guys would be good together?”

She frowned. “Is something wrong?”

"No, not at all."

"I don’t understand. Is there something you want to tell me?" She gave me a very pointed look.

I shook my head.
"You were being so supportive just a second ago, what’s the matter?” she asked.

What was the matter?

“Nothing! I just think… Makoto is a very nice boy, but he’s nice to everyone. And he’s way too nice to lead a girl on…”

“Well, yeah. But we were talking the other day, and he gave me these beautiful cherry blossoms as a gift. Flowers are a romantic gesture, right?”

As the realization sunk in, I nodded, trying not to let my voice give my feelings away. “Right,” I said, but it was hoarse. She was right. What else could it have possibly meant?

“Thanks again, Mukuro. You’re… You’re a really good—good friend, you know that?” She was surprisingly serene. “I need you by my side. I… I know I can count on you. I mean, who am I kidding? It’s just a crush, I don’t expect it to turn into anything serious. What’s most important is getting out of here. That’s my number one priority. But… I’m still chasing what I want. It’s just who I am, it’s what I’ve always done.”

I didn’t answer.

“Sayaka!” called Hina. “Jump in!”

“But I’m already drying off!” pouted Sayaka, but it was said through a laugh. It was amazing how quickly she could change her tune. It was like a mask. With more persistence from the others, she relented. “Oh, alright,” she said, dropping her towel. I looked away, but she must’ve jumped back in because I heard the big splash.

Hina shrieked with laughter at the water sprayed everywhere. Sayaka emerged, and the two of them swam off.

But Sayaka and Makoto? That was ridiculous. They were entirely wrong for each other. But… Sayaka was good and sweet and… Beautiful.

And he’d given her flowers.

I thought I was good at reading people, but maybe I was just entirely clueless.

In the middle distance, the others were involved in some sort of splash fight. I watched the amusing spectacle until Sayaka lurked over to me again.

“Come here.” She beckoned me in with her finger.

“I am here.”

“Closer. Lean in, I have something I want to tell you.”

I shook my head. “Oh, no you don’t. I’m not falling for that.”

She batted her lashes. “I promise I won't dunk you.”

I rolled my eyes, crouching low so that was nearly face to face. “Alright,” I said, “what is—”

She lunged her arms around my neck, dragging me in, and I didn't even have time to react before I felt the lurch forward, and I hit the water with a loud splash.
I broke the surface, gasping for air and coughing. “I knew it!”

She smiled innocently like some sort of ingenue. I elbowed her, splashing her just a little. I wasn’t really all that angry, but I felt the need to fight back, just to assert myself.

“The ‘drenched in chlorine-water’ vibe is a good look for you,” she said, appraising me.

“Shut up.”

—

I was wasting time in my room when I heard my doorbell ring.

Curious, I sat up from my bed, hurrying over to the door. I really had no plans for the afternoon, so I was welcome for a disruption. I opened the door. Without invitation, Toko forced herself past me and into my room. I watched her in silent disbelief, hoping for some sort of explanation. I didn’t receive one; rather she stood there, anxiously carding her fingers through her braids.

“Um… Can I help you?” I asked.

“Quit l-looking at—at me like that,” said Toko, scowling at me before averting her eyes again.

“I’m looking at you?”

“Are you joking? I know you don’t want me to be here, I c-can s-see it in—see it in your eyes.” She took a deep breath. “Whatever, I j-just… I need you to do me a—a f-favor and then I’ll stop bothering you and be out of your sight.”

“Oh, you’re not bothering me,” I said on instinct, and I was struck with memories of the previous day when she’d left the library in tears. After that, the last thing I wanted to do was hurt her feelings. Besides, she was hardly being bothersome. I didn’t have much to do in the realm of entertainment. “I’m just surprised you’re here. What’s going on?”

“C-can you come somewhere with me?”

“Um, sure?” It came out like a question. “Where?”

“The library.”

Okay.

“Hm? But you said none of the books were to your taste,” I said.

Her eyes went wide. “You r-remem-remember that?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized me. I couldn’t tell if she was suspicious or flattered.

“Well,” I said, not wanting to prolong the awkward silence, “if you want to go, let’s go.”

“Huh?” asked Toko, possibly surprised at my cooperation. “Ok, hurry, let’s go.” She was oddly insistent as we made for the door. Before leaving she turned to me. “But you h-have to—to keep—to keep this a s-secret, ok?”

I sighed. “Sure.”
The walk had just involved more awkward silence, but we crept into the library, Toko shushing me to keep quiet. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the library seemed even more poorly lit than usual. The dim lighting made it hard to see the surroundings, but Byakuya was sitting at his usual desk. To my surprise, he wasn’t the only one in the library.

“Chihiro?” I asked. “What’re you doing here?” I approached the desk where she was sitting.

“Mukuro!” Toko hissed at me, but I ignored her. I realized we were supposed to keep operation under wraps, but I didn’t see any problem with saying hello to the people who were already here.

“Huh?” Chihiro looked up and upon spotting me, snapped shut whatever she was reading—not a book, but what looked like a folder. “Oh, uh… I’m just doing some light reading.”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded skeptically, but didn’t challenge her.

“So,” said Chihiro, and I didn’t miss that as she spoke her eyes kept darting around the room. “What brings you and Toko to the library?”

I looked to Toko and then back to Chihiro. “I’m, um… not sure, actually.”

Toko was not paying attention. Instead, she was watching Byakuya with unusual attention. I shot Chihiro a questioning look, but still followed Toko’s example. I was intrigued as to where this was headed. The two of us crouched behind one of the bookshelves, getting a good look at him.

“There he is!” said Toko in hushed whispers. I’d never heard this giddiness in her tone before then. She nudged me forward. “He’s here. Go talk to him.”

“What?”

“G-go talk to him!”

“Why would I do that?” I asked.

“W-well, I can’t do it! Come on, j-just, say something!”

Byakuya looked up at us, annoyed expression on his face. “What are you doing here? Leave. the last thing I need is more people here to bother me.” As he said this, his eyes darted over to Chihiro.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“I believe I told you to leave.” He nodded to Toko. “And take her with you. I can’t afford to be bothered by the likes of you.”

“Alright then,” I said. I looked to Toko. “Let’s go.”

She hesitated. “Byakuya?”

“What?”

“Remember how you said ‘Don’t be a woman who dominates w-weak men, be a woman dominated by a s-strong man’?” asked Toko, and to my surprise she was smiling and giggling. She kept her eyes averted, tapping her little index fingers together. She was blushing.

“I never said that,” he said shortly.

“W-Well, actually, I read it somewhere, and I just thought it sounded like something you might
say…” said Toko. “It’s from—"

Byakuya bristled. “I don’t care where it’s from. Get out. And go take a bath, you reek.”

It was then that I knew I wanted to get her out.

“Wh—” began Toko, but she was cut off.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. Go.” He waved her away. “Before your stench overpowers the room.”

I’d had enough. “Let’s go.” I took her by the hand, leading her into the hall. She did not resist.

Once outside, Toko began to shake her head, muttering incoherent babble to herself. She was shaking, face ashen and glasses askew.

I wasn’t sure what to do, so I reached out a hand to comfort, but I hesitated to touch her. “Uh… Never mind him,” I said. It was all I could think so say. “He’s just being his usual irritable self.”

“I—I can’t believe he w-would—he would say that…” said Toko.

“I’m sorry,” was all I could think to say.

“H-He… he must really care about me!” she squealed, completely changing her mood. She was blushing, all sweaty and hands clasped together, eyes far away.

*What?*

“He told me t-to take a bath and everything!” responded Toko. “He must really care a-about my—my well-being!”

I hadn’t even realized I must’ve spoken aloud.

I’d never seen her so elated. She was smiling, actually smiling. On the one hand, I was relieved to know that she was not upset. On the other hand, the uneasy feeling in my stomach from the day prior had returned. Once again, it was for reasons I could not place, I just knew something was off. I didn’t know what to say.

“M-Mukuro, what do you think? Would w-we make a g-g-good—a good couple?”

I blinked. “Who?”

“Byakuya and I, of course!”

“Oh, um… Right. You and Byakuya. I… I don’t know about that…” However, not only was I unsure, I was also uneasy. I wanted to dissuade her, but I had no idea how to go about it.

I didn’t know why I was so invested in this whole ordeal, but I just… I didn’t want to make her cry again.

Is this really what love was supposed to be? Admittedly, I’d spent many years far too absorbed in my work to really know, but I imagined it should be better than this. He’d been so… so nasty to her.

I’d been wrong about Sayaka. Was I making the same mistake with Toko? I knew I was inexperienced, but maybe I really didn’t know anything about love.
“It’s ok, you don’t have to understand!” said Toko, bursting my inner thoughts. “He’s my prince! Nothing can stand between our love! I know exactly how this will go! It’s how all good stories go!” She sighed dreamily, taking my hands in hers and grinning from ear to ear. “Oh, Mukuro. Maybe some day y-you will understand love. Maybe. S-someday. If only y-you could be so lucky!”

I managed a chuckle, despite the lump in my throat. “Yeah, someday.”

Without so much as a goodbye, she sauntered away happily, still in a state of euphoria.

“Well, well, well, wasn’t that something!”

A familiar high pitched squeaky voice rang behind me.

I whirled around.

Monokuma grinned, fanning himself. “Ah, young love! To be so intertwined in such drama, Mukuro! This must all be so riveting for you! But eager passion can also be scary! Sometimes it can lead people off in the wrong direction!” And on that ominous note, he disappeared behind one of the many columns in the hallway.

I stood outside the library alone.

“Please, be careful…” I said to her, my voice faint, despite the fact that Toko was long gone.

Chapter End Notes

Initially I was very very set on making sure the tone was similar to the game, particularly involving the romantic relationships. Specifically, the fact that all the romance is mostly just implied, it never gets very serious which... is similar to what I'm going for, but I also decided to write what makes me happy so also. My fic my rules. I hope y'all like melodramatic semi-relationship bs.

Nobody is going to "date". There's murder going on here! This is not the place for dating! However, teenagers have feelings, so of course those feelings are going to be involved in the story.

Please don't forget to let me know which characters you want to see more of! Feedback helps me know which free time events to do for next chapter!

Also just. General feedback. I really like dialogue-heavy writing, and feel confident in my abilities, but when it comes to introspection & setting I fully admit those are possible weak points.

Hummus. Thoughts?
Chapter 2.3: Two Bros Chilling in a Sauna

Chapter Notes

I've had finals! I'm sorry! Thank you for being patient! (I'm gonna be completely honest, i'm sure there are still typos but this update came way later than I wanted so this is probably not in top shape but i've accepted it)

Also! I've updated chapter....... 1.2? Yeah, 1.2, to give Hifumi some characterization before like... getting *oofed*. It's pretty short, you can reread if you want. It doesn't change the current plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“—No, no, no, those conspiracy theories are so pedestrian. I mean, assuming all architecture from ancient civilizations was secretly built by aliens? Gimme a break. It’s all just a bunch of occult bullcrap.”

“Is that so?” I asked Hiro in a mixture of amusement and genuine curiosity. I didn’t exactly follow his line of logic. The occult seemed like his exact wheelhouse, so of course I had to know more.

What could I say? As a detective, curiosity was my achilles heel.

“Hell, yeah!” said Hiro. “They can’t pull the wool over these eyes.” He made the “I’m watching you” gesture with his hand. “Besides, you can’t just recite the same old tired crap over and over again. You gotta think bigger, yeah?”

“Oh, absolutely.” I did my best to nod in earnest, but it wasn’t easy. I suppressed a laugh, but a small smile slipped through, my lips a thin line as I fought back the urge.

“Faking the moon landing? Pedestrian. Hiring Stanley Kubrick to fake the moon landing, but Kubrick being such a perfectionist that he made them shoot it on location? Eh, okay, but still could use some imagination.”

“How about this,” I suggested, “‘We actually are living on the moon... but are brainwashed to think we’re still on Earth’?”

He laughed jovially, loud and raucous and with his entire body. “Now we’re talking!”

I was humoring him, just a little. I loved spending time with Hiro. Everything he said was absolute nonsense, but that was the charm. I really couldn’t help but be entertained. Maybe that was the real reason I enjoyed myself, like the way someone enjoys a bad movie. Or maybe it was more like a mystery novel? In the sense that you just never knew what he was going to say next. Hearing him talk just filled me with such an unexplained glee. I could practically see the cogs turning in his head. He just had endless gems. The gift that kept on giving. And that wasn’t even touching on the absolute conviction in his delivery.

The best part was that I was absolutely sure that the things Hiro said meant nothing to him. But they meant everything to me.

I was too distracted by my own musings to notice when Hiro pulled out a deck of cards and began to
“Where do you keep those?” I asked him.

“In my coat pocket, man. I never go anywhere without my deck.” Hiro said all this while performing all those fancy shuffles, the kind I had no idea how to pull off. The cards seemed to practically fly. “I’m down for anything: shogi, othello, poker. Hell, mahjong then drinks and call it a day—an afternoon of that and we’re friends for life. But you can’t just carry around a giant case full o’ tiles, yeah? Cards are just a classic. Never know when anyone might be down for a game! Plus, I’ve been trying my hand at readings, so we could give that a shot.”

“You mean cartomancy?” I asked.

“Yeah!”

I nodded, hoping to convey just how absolutely invested I was in the... the *everything* he was saying. “I see.”

He had a mischievous grin on his face, cards flying between his fingers. “You ever played a game of 52 pickup?”

“Oh my god.”

I turned at the sound of a familiar voice dripping with disdain. Junko was approaching our table, rolling her eyes and giving us a look.

“Hello, sis,” I said, offering her a smile.

Junko ignored me. “Not that old trick again.” She looked to me, “Look, ‘Kuro, don’t fall for that bullshit. 52 pickup? Come on, Hiro.”

I shot him a confused look, and he chuckled nervously.

Junko pulled up a chair, giving it a spin and plopping herself down so that the back was facing front. The position didn’t look comfortable, but it must’ve been for her because she made herself right at home. As usual, she had no trouble inserting herself into the conversation. “By the way, Hiro, Celeste told me to tell you that she wants some milk tea, and she doesn’t want to leave her room, so you should really go make some.”

“Huh? Why me?”

“Beats me,” she said. “But she sounded pretty insistent.”

He scowled. “No way! Tell her to make it herself!”

“You go tell her!” snapped Junko.

Something about their attitudes made them sound like bickering children.

“Alright, whatever!” said Hiro, getting up from his chair and heading out the door and to the dorms. “If it’ll get you off my back.”

She waved him off, feigning a smile. Quickly turning to me once he was out of earshot, she swung her chair around, sitting down properly with perfect coordination as the chair landed with a resounding *clunk*. In a hushed voice she said, “Okay, perfect! Now that we’ve got the walking palm tree out of the way, let’s split ‘cause I am so not into the idea of hearing him go on about faking the
moon landing for another three hours.”

“What? No!” I said. “This was just getting good.”

She gave me a dubious look. “You’re joking, right? You can’t be serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Junko sighed. “Kuro, you’ve got to be kidding me. Don’t tell me you take anything that nutcase says seriously?” Her tone was incredulous.

“Of course not.”

“Then ditch the dude and come with your way cooler little sister.” Junko took my by the hands, laying it on thick in her attempt to be as persuasive as possible. She put on her best cutesy voice, doe eyes wide and pleading. “Pwease?”

“Oh god.” What a little shit. I rolled my eyes, but it was still pretty funny. “Don’t you play the little sister card,” I chided her. “Hiro is my friend, too.”

“Come on! It’ll be fun! Today, I’m going to introduce you to contouring.”

I frowned. “But what if he comes back?”

I didn’t want to abandon Hiro, but truth be told that was only part of it. Something about the mention of makeup once more was like an instant deterrent. Sure, the results were pretty, but at what cost?

“Oh my god, who cares!” said Junko, throwing her hands in the air. I could tell she seemed genuinely aggravated. “You are such a stick in the mud.” She pouted.

“Junko, I said no.” My voice was firm.

She glowered, not meeting my eyes and instead staring stubbornly down at the floor as she crossed her arms.

I softened, regretting my tone almost instantly and relenting just a bit. “Look… Can’t it just wait? I —”

“Yeah, yeah, you already have plans. Got it.” Her tone was short. She sunk back into her chair, leaning away from me. Muttering so quiet that I was sure it wasn’t meant for me, she added, “I hope he gets lost in this fucking school and never comes back.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I said. I knew the words weren’t meant for me, but I was too shocked and disappointed in her to care.

“Ok, ok, not really,” she grumbled. But in an even lower voice she added, “I didn't mean for, like, forever, but just for a little while.”

“Junko,” I warned.

She bounced up and down in her seat. “Come on, ‘Kuro, learn to take a joke!”

I ignored this. “Junko, I can’t just ditch,” I said, trying to reason with her. “I told him I’d let him do a reading.”

“You’re making me all depressed just saying that,” she said, getting all moody and melancholy,
temperament shifting again as she sullenly carded through her long hair. She sighed again, getting over herself. “He’s not here. Come ooooonnn,” she whined. “I go through all this effort to get rid of him, you can’t play me like this. We hardly saw each other at all the other day because you were being dragged around by Specs. At breakfast I saw you talking with Sayaka, and you’ve been hanging with Shaggy a lot. I feel like I never get to see you.”

“We see each other all the time. You know I’d love to, but I already made an obligation. Otherwise I’d be there in a heartbeat.”

“Fine,” said Junko. She turned away dramatically. “I guess I’ll just taste the bitter abandonment alone.”

“Come on, sis, don’t be like that—”

“No, I see, I know when I’ve been tossed asunder, left to wither away in the cold.” She was still putting on a wounded voice.

God, she was such a primadonna.

“Junko.”

To my surprise, her eyes started welling up, and her voice got choked up. “W-We used to hang out all the time, and n-now we—we never hang out. And you never want to see me b-because you’re always—always with those other losers,” she wailed, but even through her meltdown she managed to get a good deal amount of scorn into the insult. She began to ramble, gesturing vaguely with her hands, words somehow managing to form into something coherent between her high-pitched blubbering. “And I—I thought it might’ve been because I got—I got mad at you the other day, and so I figured I’d done something wrong, and you were upset with me because you’re always soooo busy now, and-and-and I haven’t even seen you since the pool party, and—”

“Junko, I—I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were this upset,” I said. I felt a pang in my chest. Seeing her like this caused me physical pain. I… I had no idea she would get this upset.

“No it’s—” she said through gasps of air as she fanned herself. Even then she couldn’t completely give up her dramatics. “It’s fine, I’ll just go and—”

“No! I’ll—I’ll make it up to you,” I said. I could fix this. I was her big sister. It was my job to fix this. “After dinner. Contouring. For sure. We can make it like… a thing. Like a sleepover or something.”

She sniffed, but was unable to manage her nose and mascara running everywhere. “Promise?” For once, she looked a real mess.

“Promise.”

Our moment was interrupted by the sound of footsteps and deep booming voices so loud they came from outside the dining hall.

“You wanna fuckin’ say that again?”

“Very well, I will! I—”

The two men paused, spotting us at the same time we turned to see who had just entered the cafeteria.

“Ah! Junko and Mukuro! Most excellent we should run into you at a time like this!”
Junko groaned. “Hello, Taka,” she said in a way that made it sound like pure obligation, letting her voice droll unenthusiastically. Realizing the state she was in, she sniffed, dabbing at her eyes a bit and turning away to avoid looking at them.

“Junko! You look positively awful! Are you quite alright?” asked Taka.

She glared at him. “Peachy keen.”

Before Taka could respond, Mondo cut in. “Hey! Junko, detective chick,” he said. “Help us settle this, would ya?”

Detective chick?

“What is it?” asked Junko, and surely any other two people would have withered under her icy glare, but not these two.

Why did Junko get a name and I was just “detective chick”? I was still hung up on it and ended up nearly missing their response, something Taka said about just settling a dispute?

“Awww, are you guys having a little domestic? Caught up in a little lover’s quarrel?” said Junko to the two boys, cooing sarcastically. “As much as I’d love to get in the middle of all that,” she said, gesturing between them and getting to her feet. However, her tone gave off the impression that she was less than enthused. “I just realized, I’m busy.”

“Busy?” I asked her. “With what?”

Just a second ago she’d been begging me to be her test subject, and now she was leaving me to fend for myself?

I grit my teeth, but remained dutifully in my seat. This must have been my punishment for choosing Hiro over her. I would endure it.

Taka was bright red. “What does she—Mukuro, your sister h—has misconstrued the point entirely! To call this a ‘domestic’ is to imply a long-standing and committed romantic relationship and… and… To even imply—I!” He cleared his throat, shake his head. “And we are not fighting! We are merely having a…” A pause to consider his words. “Spirited debate!”

Mondo shook his head. “Call it what you like, don’t make me act like I give a fuck.”

“Fine! Mukuro, do us a favor and help us settle this score!” said Taka.

Just the speed of the conversation was making me feel dizzy. My head was spinning. “Alright, alright. Spill.”

“Look, I dunno what the hell I did, but this guy will not get off my case!” said Mondo. “Calling me a coward and shit since day one,” he said.

“But I thought…” I began, my sentence trailing off.

Huh.
They’d seemed to be getting on pretty well when we’d first been introduced. I’d imagine there must’ve been some relief to find someone you’d previously recognized. It’d certainly be comforting in as unfamiliar an environment as this.

Had I failed to notice this rift in their relationship? I thought I was a people person. Maybe I was losing my touch.

Mondo ignored my absent-minded comments and instead said to Taka, “Man, who the fuck do you think you are? You think I’m a coward?”

“You are a coward!” said Taka, brow furrowing so deep that his perpetual scowl looked even more severe than usual. “Always resorting to violence! Thinking it will solve all your problems! I—You are better than this, Mondo!”

“Better than—” For just a moment, he was disarmed, but he recovered with twice the anger—and twice the volume. “Th’fuck you mean, I’m better than this?” said Mondo. “You don’t know me, man!”

“I know plenty!” said Taka, voice raising first to match and then to outdo Mondo’s. “You’ve changed, Mondo! And if you had enough self-respect you’d clean up your act! It’s clear from your lack of self-control and the way you… you glorify gangsters that you… You’re not the man I thought you were!”

Glorify gangsters?

I assumed Taka must’ve gotten that impression from his hair. It was the only thing that really made sense. That sort of style—showy, obstructive, full of gel—would have surely been totally impractical and out of place in a traditional dojo, but it… almost might’ve made sense in the counterculture scene of delinquents. Almost.

“The hell are you saying?” said Mondo. “You sayin’ I’m not a man? I’m more of a man than you! The fuck does a kid like you know about being a man? What’s a kid like you know about anything?”

“I am certain I’m more of a man than you!” said Taka. “I expected much more from the Ultimate Martial Artist! You have a gift, and it’s being completely squandered! Fighters ought to be disciplined, and yet as is usual with geniuses, you’ve gone completely unchecked! Here you are, more reckless than you’ve ever been!”

“That’s real rich,” said Mondo, practically spitting the words out. “Tryna tell me what a fighter is. You dunno know shit about me—or about being a real fighter. You think you’re a real man? Is that what a real man is? A fuckin’ brown-noser with some sort of fucked up fetish for authority? Quit being so pathetic, you think you’re so big and bad, huh? Man, I can’t believe I used to think you were kinda cool, but whatever I saw—either it’s long gone, or I must’ve been out of my goddamn mind. You think you’re tougher than me? Well then, prove it!”

“I accept your challenge!” said Taka, standing his ground as Mondo practically bellowed in his face.

Say anything else, but the kid definitely had guts. Not just anyone could withstand the heat once Mondo zeroed in on them. Even fewer people would intentionally challenge him.

Either he was very brave or very foolish.

Mondo cracked his knuckles, impish smile on his face. “Perfect,” he said. “Let’s throw down, see if you’ve still got it.”
“Excellent,” said Taka.

“Y’all aren’t gonna go all 12 rounds right here in the cafeteria?” I asked, exasperated. “Because at the very least you should let me turn around so I have plausible deniability.” And that sounded a little too much like Junko, so I added for good measure, “But seriously, don’t fight. Is there any way we can’t solve this in a more… constructive manner?”

Taka hesitated. “Perhaps Mukuro has a point. Violence would certainly reflect poorly on us. We can solve this matter… through competition of other means!”

I rubbed my forehead, letting out a deep sigh. “Fine. But you’re being supervised. If this gets out of hand I’d at least rather have it happen under the comfort of my own watch,” I said, hating the fact that I sounded exactly like a cool mom. My ears were still ringing from all the yelling.

“Fine,” grumbled Mondo. “We need a witness anyway.” He gestured to the door with his thumb. “Across the way, there’s a sauna. Follow what I’m sayin’?”

Taka nodded. “An endurance contest!”

“’Xactly.”

“A most excellent choice! So whoever stays in the sauna the longest wins.” Taka considered it for the briefest of moments before adding, “I accept these terms!”

I groaned.

—

“For the last time, are you guys sure you wanna go through with this?” I asked as we made our way to the bathhouse across the hall.

“Positive!” said Taka.

I was dragging my heels, just a bit. While I’d warmed considerably to the both of them during our stay, I was still hesitant to get mixed up in this sort of mess. All the same, I’d be damned to let them go off on their own and hurt each other, or… or worse.

“Excuse me?”

I turned at the voice, and to my surprise Makoto was exiting the dorms and heading toward us.

“Hello, Makoto,” I said.

“What on earth is—” he began, bewildered look on his face but Taka interrupted.

“Makoto! Most excellent that we would run into you at a time like this!”

“A time like...” For a moment, he looked absolutely bewildered, but he shook his head. “Never mind it. Mukuro, I wanted to talk—”

“Well then,” I said, and he was close enough to us by then that I quickly reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him along. “Come. You can walk and talk.”

“Oh!” He didn’t resist. “A-Alright then.” A little quieter, he leaned in and added, “What am I getting roped into?”
“Consider it a... surprise. If I’m going down, I’m taking somebody with me.”

“How unfortunate,” he said, but he was smiling nonetheless as he allowed himself to be dragged along.

I didn’t really know what I was doing. I never behaved like this. Perhaps I was emboldened; like I’d said, if I was going down I was taking someone with me. But my behavior, my level of impulsiveness, reminded me much more of Junko than myself in those moments.

It really wasn’t that exciting. Perhaps I really was just boring.

Once in the bath house, I explained to him, “It’s an endurance contest. Mondo and Taka are going to see who can last the longest in the sauna.”

“What?” asked Makoto, astonished. “What are you—what is—why are dragging me into this?” He was simultaneously worried and indignant.

“Who can be a better mediator than the moral compass himself,” I said. In hushed tones, I added, “Or... you can try and stop them.” I gave him a pointed look at the two boys who were still arguing.

“Wha—why me?” asked Makoto.

“Because I won’t,” I said flatly.

Makoto looked apprehensive. “Guys, is this even safe?”

I grinned. “That’s why we have you. You’re ref now.”

I’d never seen him look more wary. “I don’t know if this is—”

“Nonsense!” interrupted Taka. “It will be over in a matter of minutes!”

“So sure of yourself, huh?” asked Mondo. “We’ll see if you’re all talk.”

“I still don’t feel so good about this,” said Makoto.

“Look, dude,” said Mondo. “Don’t try to talk us out of this, alright? We’re going through with this.”

Makoto sighed.

Upon standing there a minute in uncomfortable near-silence, Taka exclaimed, “Mukuro! I have come to a realization!”

“Oh?” I asked.

“You are a girl, so I—I do not think you can be our supervisor!”

“Okay...” I said, not really following. I waited for his explanation.

“I—I...” He appeared to be struggling, finally blurtng out, “I think it would be inappropriate for a girl to see us in a state of undress!”

“The chick investigates dead bodies,” grumbled Mondo. “And that’s what you’re fuckin’ worried about?”

“I... I realize this,” said Taka. “I just... don’t think it would be right!”
“Hey, if you want me gone,” I said, holding up my hands in resignation.

While I’d been committed earlier to seeing this through, I was okay with taking a leave as long as someone was keeping an eye on them. I still found Taka’s logic to be nonsensical, but, really, that was my get-out-of-jail-free card. Who was I to argue?

I tried not to look too thrilled, probably failing. “Makoto, you’re babysitter now, right? Be safe, guys. I’ll be out.” I shot him a peace sign and a cheesy grin and was about to head for the door.

“Hold on a sec’!” Makoto’s voice rang out.

“Hm?” I glanced at him.

“Won’t you stay?” asked Makoto, giving me a pleading look with those big puppy-dog eyes.

Damn it.

I paused, feigning taking a moment to think it over. “Oh, alright then.”

“Fine, then let’s make this interesting,” said Mondo. “Taka, if you’re so goddamn worried, how about we battle with all our clothes on?”

Taka gasped. “That’s—that’s idiotic! Suicidal!”

“You afraid?” Mondo cracked his knuckles.

“I-I’m with Taka, here,” said Makoto. “This seems a bit dangerous. Not everything has to be a competition.”

“YES, IT DOES!” the boys bellowed back at the same time.

For a moment I was wondering if maybe Taka would back down, but if there was any hope of that it was gone.

—

“How are they looking?” I asked, my back turned away from the door.

“Well,” said Makoto, peeking through the window in the sauna door, “they are certainly… in there.”

I snorted. “Okay?”

“Uh, guys?” asked Makoto. “You good in there?”

They ignored him, too into their competition to be distracted.

Makoto looked to me. “They seem okay. So far.”

“Relax,” I said. “It’ll work itself out. They’re just being dramatic, it’ll be over soon.”

He frowned. “I don’t know,” he said. “I mean, you saw how they tend to get carried away when they push themselves.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I paused, a thought striking me. “Hey, Makoto?” I asked. “About earlier. Were you going to ask me something?”

“Huh? Oh!” He shook his head, scratching his already wild hair. “Right, well now it just seems
“Come on,” I said. “We’re in a bathhouse together, babysitting these two sweaty dumbbells while they try to prove their masculinity. I think we’re already at the height of silly.”


I shrugged.

“Well,” he said, “I didn’t have anything in particular I wanted to ask. I suppose… I just had an impulse.”

“Impulse?”

“Yeah, I just knew I wanted to… It’s been a bit. I… I like spending time with you.”

I was touched.

“No one’s ever said that to me before.”

He was shocked. “Really?” he asked, his mouth agape.

“Yes. I work a lot. Don’t get much free time to just, uh… hang out, I guess?” I hesitated. “Well… I used to work a lot.”

He shrugged. “At least you have something to go back to.”

“What do you mean?” I asked him warily.

“I mean,” said Makoto, “Mukuro! You have an amazing talent!”

I flushed red at this, my face growing hot.

He continued. “I’m sure once we… once we get out of here the world is going to open up to you! I’m sure you’re going to get all the success you deserve. I… I’m a fluke.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“We… I know we’re stuck here like this, but. If I’m right, all of us—we’re the 78th. This was going to be our year at Hope’s Peak. And… to see all this passion and talent from you guys. I don’t know what I was thinking, coming to a school like Hope’s Peak.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I told him. “You’re Ultimate Moral Compass. That’s gotta count for something, right?”

He nodded, hugging his arms close to his chest. “Thank you, Mukuro. I just feel… everyone is so devoted to their passions. I don’t belong here. These kids. They have dreams and goals. They have futures. Me? I’m not remarkable. I’m not the smartest one here, or the fastest, or even the richest. I study, and not even as much as I ought, I listen to top 40, I can talk to most people but didn’t have too many close friends, this silly committee position is the only real accomplishment I have, and all my job really is… is to make sure that everyone gets along. I don’t even know who I am or what I like. I’m afraid… I’m afraid of graduating and the world is gonna realize ‘there’s a kid that stands for nothing’. I’m beyond ordinary.”

“Makoto, I guarantee you’re overthinking this,” I said. “You don’t have to have your life planned out. You know what’s better than devoting your life to a crazy specific talent? Knowing how to
adapt. Knowing how to work with others. Knowing how to help people. Wanting to help people. I’ve been in the workforce; adults respect those traits. I’m telling you…” I quickly looked down at the floor, hoping he wouldn’t see my face, “you’re a lot more extraordinary than you think.”

“Wow...You really think so?” asked Makoto.

“Yeah, well…” I grunted, clearing my throat and looking down at the ground. “I, uh... I’m sure the others would agree.” I fidgeted around a bit, staring intently at my shoes. “They’d feel the same way. We’re all glad you’re here.”

Some people in particular seemed glad that he was here, but I wasn’t about to air anybody’s dirty laundry.

He smiled that brilliant smile of his. “Thanks, Mukuro.”

I nodded, still red in the face. “Now, uh, it’s been a hot minute,” I said, hastily changing the subject. “How are the boys?”

Makoto peeked through the window again. “Uh... Fine. Alive,” he said, but the the expression of worry still weighed on him, brow furrowed heavily as he frowned.

I could hear the two of them talking from the inside. They were being pretty loud, as always.

“H-Hey, Mondo.”

“What asshole?”

“You can take off your uniform, you know. Go ahead, I won’t judge.”

“And you can shut the fuck up and mind your own business. I mean look at you.”

I shot Makoto a look, hiding a snort behind my hand. He shook his head at me disapprovingly.

A few minutes passed.

Then a few dozen minutes.

I was getting antsy. “Let me see,” I said, nudging Makoto aside so that I could look. To my surprise, he moved aside for me without much protest.

Despite my agitation, I bit back a laugh. Mondo had a towel draped over his hair; how its integrity hadn’t been compromised was anyone’s guess. As expected, he was fully clothed, drenched with sweat. Surprisingly, he seemed to be holding it together better than Taka, who was wearing nothing but a towel and was already looking pretty worn.

Two revved up jocks sitting in the sauna. To see this sort of stunt pulled by an Ultimate Martial Artist wasn’t much of stretch, but I hadn’t presumed Taka to be the type to be all fixated on machismo. I really didn’t know people at all. Maybe I really was losing my touch.

Their faces were scrunched up in intense concentration. The mix of the sweat and the steam and the heat and the muscles was verging on a repulsive sight.

“Hey guys, are you sure you don’t want to just call it a day?” I asked.

“BACK OFF!” they yelled at the same time.
“Okay, okay…”

“Mukuro, you can be sure it will be done with soon enough!” said Taka.

“You sure about that, asshole?” asked Mondo. “Because I can stay here as long as it takes. So unless you’re thinking of backing down, we ain’t goin’ anywhere!”

I smiled wryly. “Gotcha.”

More minutes passed. Makoto and I made idle chatter, every once in a while checking on the door. It was getting close to an hour.

I heard Taka’s voice.

“D-Don’t you think… it’s about time… you gave up?”

“What about you? You can’t even hardly talk… dumbass.”

“Say wh-whatever you want… I’m still totally… good to go! In fact, I’m starting to feel… kinda cold!”

“That’s… prolly not good.”

Curiosity getting the better of me, I peeked inside again. At that point, they were both breathing heavily, chests heaving up and down. If truth be told, Taka looked close to passing out, but I had a pretty good feeling I would get yelled at if I came in there and tried to stop them.

I tried to reason with them just one more time. “Look,” I said, “I know you guys are trying to prove who’s the bigger badass or whatever…”

I rolled my eyes. Men.

“But,” I continued, “I think you’re good, ya know? I think you’ve made your point. You’re both very tough and very strong. I mean, you don’t gotta prove anything to me, anyways.” I didn’t know if they could see me through the all the condensation on the window, but I put on my best flirtatious smile.

Maybe if I could flatter their egos…

It didn’t even phase them.

Just then, the bell went off and Monokuma made his usual Night Time announcement.

I scowled, annoyed at my failed persuasion skills. “Makoto,” I hissed to him, nodding in the direction of the door and moving aside.

“Right!” He took my place in an instant. “Guys, it’s Night Time. Don’t you think it’s time for you to just call it a tie?”

“In a true competition… there’s no such thing as a tie!” wheezed Taka.

Yep, he was definitely breathless.

“You win, or you lose. That’s… the only thing that matters!”
I didn’t say anything, but I was tired of all the zero-sum game talk. It was exhausting.

Mondo laughed at Taka, but when he did, it was equally as short-winded. “Listen to you… you son of a bitch!” There was something wild and almost devilish about the look in his eyes.

“Th-This isn’t good, guys,” said Makoto.

I suddenly remembered the promise I’d made to Junko.

“Crap!”

Makoto quickly looked to me. “What is it?”

“Nothing, nothing,” I said. I didn’t want him to worry about me. “I just remembered, I have an obligation. You know, Junko, sisterly things, duty calls. I told her that I’d see her after dinner. I can’t keep her waiting, or she’ll be pissed.”

“Oh, well… alright.”

Perhaps it was my imagination, but he looked a touch crestfallen.

The moment passed, and he smiled. “Well, best if we not keep you. I will see you again tomorrow!”

“Of course.” I smiled.

The two guys were not done.

“Yeah, while we’re on it, Taka, why don’t…. don’t you go with her? You look about…. ready to give up!”

“Never! I’m just… just getting started! Makoto, why don’t… don’t you just… go! Go on ahead with Mukuro, this’ll be over soon enough!”

“Are you sure?” asked Makoto, but he was wringing his hands anxiously, eyeing the exit.

“GO!” they bellowed, and they absolutely did not need to tell us twice.

—

Once out in the hall, I turned to Makoto.

“Hey, thanks for at least trying to talk to them back there. I certainly couldn’t do it.”

He frowned. “I supposed. I feel like I failed. I’m worried. What if they push themselves too hard?”

We continued to walk and talk over to the dorms.

“They’re smart. Well… Taka is there, and he’s reasonably smart. Well. He can be responsible, anyway. When he wants to be.”

He nodded, obviously still not convinced.

To be honest, I wasn’t really sure how much I’d convinced myself either. I was worried, too, but I wasn’t about to sit there all night. And really, my sister always came first.
“If it makes you feel any better,” I said, “you didn’t do any worse than me. Maybe if I were Junko, or Sayaka, I could’ve...”

“Why do you say that?” asked Makoto.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe because they’re beautiful and charming and charismatic and stuff like that.”

“True, to be fair, I’m starting to think that nobody in the world could talk those guys down once they get going. And Junko isn’t always the most compassionate type,” said Makoto. “No offense!” he added hastily.

I shrugged. “She probably wouldn’t be bothered by you saying that.”

“Besides,” said Makoto, ignoring my comment and continuing. “Who cares about all that! They’re not you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I care about them very much, but Junko is Junko, and Sayaka is Sayaka. And you’re you! I like you the way you are! You shouldn’t wish to be any different!” He was so unbelievably earnest.

I blushed for what felt like the millionth time. “Thank you, Makoto. That means a lot.”

“Of course! We’re friends, right?”

“Yes, why would you ask that?”

“I just wanted… to… to check.”

I chuckled, pausing outside Junko’s room. “Alright, well, goodnight then, Makoto.”

“Goodnight, Mukuro.”

—

Upon waking, I sat up straight away upon realizing I’d slept through Monokuma’s morning announcement. Thoughts of last night rushing back to me, I dressed more quickly than usual, more than a little worried about what might have transpired last night. Loud and obnoxious as those to could be, I didn’t want anything to happen to them. Really, my annoyance held no real malice; I supposed it could have been similar to the way one was annoyed to a brother. I just hoped they didn’t get carried away.

I rushed over to the dining hall, only to enter to the sound of boisterous laughter.

“What the...”

Monda and Taka were arm in arm beside each other, laughing and joking and smiling like nothing had even transpired the previous day.

“What’re you talkin’ about, bro?”

“Really now! You shouldn’t tease me, brother!”

At that moment, Leon walked in, and upon seeing the two of them together like this scratched his head and muttered, “What the crap?”
He pulled up a seat next to Hina and Makoto. I followed suit, finding a spot nearby to sit between Sayaka and Junko.

“It’s so weird,” said Makoto. “They’re acting like they’ve been best friends the whole time.” He looked to me. “What on earth happened?”

Hina took a draft of her morning protein shake. “ Heck if I know, but they’ve been like this all morning. Is it weirding you out as much as it’s weirding me out?”

We all glanced over at them again. Mondo and Taka were still laughing it up, too absorbed to even notice anybody else was there.

“Yeah,” said Leon. “Now that you mention it.”

“I don’t know,” I mused. “Maybe this’ll be good for them.”

Hina and Leon both looked at me like I was crazy.

“All I’m saying,” I said, considering my words, “is that… they were at each other’s throats pretty bad yesterday. Maybe this is a good thing.”

Makoto nodded. “If it means we’re all getting along, at least…”

“Fair enough,” said Hina, but she was still pouting. “But they’re just so loud.” She covered her ears just as Mondo’s booming laughter rung throughout the cafeteria again.

“Hey, Mukuro!”

At hearing my name, I glanced over to see Mondo waving at me with a huge grin on his face.

I offered the smallest of waves back.

“Mukuro! How magnificent to see you again!” said Taka. “Thank you so much for acting as our witness yesterday!”

“Sorry, you did what now?” asked Leon, gaping at me.

I grit my teeth, hoping beyond hope that I wasn’t going red. All the same, I could feel my ears starting to burn. “It’s nothing,” I said through my teeth. “Just some dumb contest they wanted me to ref. Makoto was there, ask him about it.”

“Hm?” asked Makoto. “Oh! Y-Yeah, I was. Now that you mention it...” he turned to Mondo and Taka, “Who won the contest?”

“Who gives a shit!” roared Mondo, smile gone in an instant.

Taka scowled, snapping on the defensive and coming to his new bro’s aid. “Yeah, don’t ask stupid questions! What matters is that we both took part in it together!”

“That’s… not what you were saying yesterday,” said Makoto.

“Forget yesterday!” said Taka. “Forget, Forget, Forget Beam!” He made a weird beam gesture with his hands, and the two of them laughed, putting their arms around each other once more.

“Nice one, bro!”
Junko groaned, rubbing her temples. “Hey! Pipe the fuck down, will you?” she called. “No shouting until after I’ve had my coffee.”

“Ignore her, bro!” said Taka. “She couldn’t possibly hope to understand our *manly bond*.”

“Damn straight!”

Junko rolled her eyes. “I don’t think I’m missing out on much.”

As annoyed as everyone seemed to be, in the end, I didn’t really mind. They could have their fun. I was sick of competitions and zero-sum games.

Sayaka frowned. “Friendship between men is so strange,” she mused. She was looking very pretty as usual, hair tied with the same large pink bow she often wore. How was she always so perfect? “It seems very…”

*Simplistic?*

She looked to me. “Simplistic.” Before I could even question how she guessed, she added, “Intuition.” She smiled, taking my hands in hers. “It’s just not the same as friendships I’ve experienced with girls, don’t you agree?”

I sputtered incoherently. If I was worried about blushing before, I definitely was now.

Junko snorted. “Someone’s starstruck. I didn’t know you two were so close.”

I didn’t answer.

Taka hardly seemed to register our conversation. “Friendship between men is stronger than blood!” he said. “A woman like her could never understand!”

“Well said, bro!”

Hina was sitting in silence, drinking her protein drink. She didn’t look up or say anything to the rest of us, which was quite unlike Hina.

Sayaka rose to her feet, letting go of my hand. “Hina, come with me to the kitchen, will you?”

“Huh? Oh, sure…” She got up, shooting Sayaka a wary look.

I watched them go, the two girls so graceful and beautiful, Sayaka taking Hina’s hand where she once held mine.

Chihiro teetered in on dainty, unsteady legs with an adorable yawn.

“Hello, dearie,” said Junko. “What brings the early bird here at this hour?”

“Huh?” asked Chihiro. “Oh! I overslept.” Her eyes darted over to Mondo and Taka. “What is going on over there?”

“That?” said Junko. “Ignore them, they’ve fallen into a deep, passionate bromance that with our luck will be as eternal as it is fraternal.”

Chihiro watched them, transfixed and eyes wide. “Ahhhh. I see now.” She was absolutely starry-eyed.
I shot her a questioning look. “What’re you hungry for?” I asked, changing the subject as I got up from my chair.

“Huh?”

“I’ll get you something,” I said. “Come with!”

She seemed surprised when I took her hand and led her to the kitchen. I felt a twinge of guilt. Really, it was just curiosity getting the better of me, wondering what Sayaka and Hina were up to.

“Huh? Oh, sure…”

Upon entering the kitchen, Sayaka and Hina turned to look at us.

Hina waved, sitting on the counter and munching on packet donuts.

“Hello, there!” said Sayaka. She was stirring something over the stovetop. “Sorry about taking up all the space, I can make room if you need to use a burner.”

“Oh, thank you, Sayaka,” said Chihiro, “but I think I’ll just have a cup of coffee.”

“You sure?”

“Positive, but I appreciate the offer.” Chihiro’s little smile was heartwarming.

“I’ll start that for you,” said, grabbing the pot so that I could put it in the brewer.

“You don’t have to—”

“I got it. What are friends for?” I said, but my eyes were watching Sayaka.

Sayaka tapped her spoon, setting it aside momentarily to check on Hina. She put her hands on Hina’s shoulders. “Are you alright?”

Hina nodded, pausing to chew and swallow her half-eaten donut. “Really, Sayaka. I’m okay! You don’t have to keep asking,” she said.

“I know,” said Sayaka. “I just wasn’t sure if you wanted to hear all that chummy friend talk. I’m sure this must be very hard for you—”

“I said, I’m fine,” said Hina, perhaps a little bit more insistent than before. “I wasn’t even thinking about… you know.”

“I realize, but just know that I am here.”

“Look, I know what you’re thinking, but Sakura and I were… “ She looked down at her hands, picking at her nails. “We were never that close. I mean we weren’t like that,” she said, gesturing to the cafeteria door. By that, she could only mean like Taka and Mondo. “I didn’t… I guess I really understand her at all, did I?”

She began to sob, head in her hands, big fat tears streaming down her face. “I loved her s-so much, and--and she didn’t even know. She said she would always protect me. Why was it her and not me?”

The three of us watched, dumbfounded. Seeing her sobbing, I knew I had to say something. We couldn't just watch her in silence.
"Sakura tried to protect you. She would want you to remember that," said Sayaka.

"Well, I'm sorry if I'm having a little bit of a hard time being grateful," said Hina. "If that's supposed to help me rest easy. I'd rather have her here." She broke down in tears once more. "Why would she leave me? I thought she was always gonna be b--by my side.

I had to say something.

“It’s... It's okay if you didn’t know her,” I said. “Sometimes, you can just… feel it.”

“F-Feel what?” asked Hina. She sniffed, head raised to look at me.

I could feel everybody’s eyes on me. “That... someone is important to you. The people who change your life aren’t always around for as long as you expect. Or... or wish. It’s not about the amount of time, it’s about what you did with it.”

Sayaka was beaming. “Profound as always, Mukuro.”

“Or pretentious,” I said, laughing weakly to diffuse the tension. “So take it with a grain of salt.”

Hina smiled, sniffling and wiping her eyes. “No, that… makes me feel better.”

“We’re here for you,” said Sayaka. “Us girls, we gotta look out for each other. Isn’t that right, Chihiro?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, of course,” she squeaked, presumably caught off-guard.

Returning to the cafeteria, Hina was back in high spirits. She was chatting with Sayaka. I stayed behind with Chihiro, standing a ways away.

Chihiro took a sip of her coffee, watching the others in the dining hall. “Um... I’m curious.”

I looked to her. “About?”

“Mondo and Taka. They are getting along so much better. What happened?”

I shrugged. “There was an argument and a whole ordeal about a contest and—”

“Contest?”

“Yes,” I said. “To see who was the strongest, or had the most endurance, or fortitude, or machismo or something.” When she looked mystified, I clarified. “They dragged me to the sauna to see who could last the longest. It was a whole thing.”

“I see...” she said. “So, who won?”

I shrugged again. “Hell if I know. They won’t say.”

Chihiro giggled. “I imagine that would have been very funny to see.”

“I guess,” I said. My gaze turned to Junko, who was in conversation with Leon. Beside them, Sayaka pulled up a chair beside Makoto. I frowned. “Sometimes I wish the men here would be a little less... hot-headed.”

“I suppose,” said Chihiro, but she wasn’t listening to me. She had that same starry-eyed expression as earlier. “Still, you have to admire the confidence.”
“If that’s what you call it.”

Our conversation was interrupted by loud bells and static.

Everyone turned their heads to the sight of Monokuma on the monitors. “Ahem! This is a school announcement. Everyone gather in the gym. Emergency! Emergency!”

The screen blacked out. We all stood silently, watching each other with expressions of anxiety.

Makoto frowned. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

I shook my head. “Neither do I.”

“But,” said Makoto. “... It’s probably best to just do what he wants.”

“What?” said Mondo. “You’re just gonna roll over for him like that?” He was stern with indignation as he looked to Makoto, all signs of smitten puppy-love gone in an instant.

Seems Monokuma could kill the mood even to the most infatuated of bros.

“Listen,” said Makoto. “I’m not any happier about this than you guys. I doubt this is anything good, but... we have to be smart about this.”

Several of the others nodded. Our eyes met, and I shot him a nod of reassurance.

Hina groaned. “Let’s just go and get this over with!”

And so we did.

—

Upon entering the gym, the remaining students were waiting for us. Byakuya and Celeste were just as blasé as ever, but Toko looked seriously apprehensive.

I watched her. “You alright, Toko?”

She eyed me suspiciously, not replying but shaking her head vigorously.

“What took you so long?” asked Byakuya.

Junko rolled her eyes. “Sorry, the ominous emergency announcement didn’t exactly liven up the mood. Might've killed the spring in my step just a touch. We may have been dragging our feet a little, ya know?”

Celeste nodded curtly in greeting. “What a strange announcement. Curious, is it not?”

“If by curious you mean weird as fuck, then yeah,” said Leon. “Is everyone here? I don’t like the vibe of this, gives me the creeps.”

At that exact moment, Hiro barged in, breathing heavily. “Hey, I’m here, man, got lost on the way to the dining hall! Didn’t mean to keep y’all waiting, that’s on me.”

“Y-Y-You s-sure took your—your sweet time!” said Toko.

“Hey! I’ll have you know, I have a perfectly good excuse for why I’m late!” said Hiro.

“Let me guess, is it aliens?” asked Junko.
“Not everything is about the aliens, Junko,” said Hiro. “... Sometimes it’s the illuminati,” he added hastily before continuing, “I got distracted.”

“By the illuminati?” asked Hina.

“No, by the noises!” said Hiro. Even he sounded frustrated. “That’s why I was late. I could’ve sworn I heard something outside the dorms!”

“Noise?” asked Taka. “What sort of noise?”

“Well…” said Hiro, ignoring Taka’s intense gaze. He stroked his barely-there stubble, in thought. “It’s hard to tell, it was so faint, ya know? But if I had to describe it, it sounded like… a construction site?”

“Ugh!” Toko shook her head, scoffing. “It’s p-probably just the rocks r-r-rattling around in—in that empty head of his!”

“For real,” said Junko. “And you’re saying nobody else heard these noises?”

“Well, no, but—”

“There you go,” said Junko, she said, waving her hand in a dismissive manner and looking to the rest of the group. “Next thing you know, he’ll be blaming it on ghosts or bigfoot or some other cryptid.”

“Ghosts are not cryptids, they are paranormal!” said Hiro. “If you knew the difference—”

“I believe you,” I cut in.

Everyone looked to me.

I nodded, noticing the surprise on both Hiro’s and Junko’s faces. I was going to remain resolute. “Yeah. I believe you, Hiro.”

It didn’t seem farfetched to me. And yet everyone was staring as if I had just admitted to the belief in the tooth fairy. Was was the fuss about? All I was doing was deigning the possibility. And a possibility was still a possibility. Why should it matter if the evidence came from Hiro or any other person here?

“Mukuro, you’ve got to be kidding me,” said Junko.

“It’s ridiculous. What a waste of time,” said Byakuya.

“Maybe this means there are people outside!” said Hina. She’d been so defeated as of late that for a moment I was glad that she looked almost… hopeful.

“That’s exactly why I find it hard to believe,” said Byakuya.

“Let me try to understand,” said Celeste. “Hope’s Peak is in the middle of a dense urban area. If there are people around, surely help would’ve come by now. Is this what you mean?”

“Hmph.”

“Of course, there is the possibility that whoever it is in charge is so powerful that they also have control of the authorities,” said Celeste.

Byakuya rolled his eyes. “And what did I say about relying on the cops.”
“Screw the cops,” said Mondo. “What the fuck does it mean? Are there people outside or not?”

Taka gasped. “But… But if the police cannot help us then who—”

“No one,” said Byakuya. “The sooner you accept it, the sooner you accept reality.”

Chihiro sniffed. “Perhaps you guys are right… It really does seem impossible…”

“Quit saying stuff like that!” said Hina to Byakuya. “You’re sick, you know that?”

He smirked. “I’m just participating in the game.”

“What the fuck is your problem?” asked Leon.

“Who’s the one with the problem, here? The fact that you’re all so delusional that you’d rather live in denial of your situation… It’s almost admirable.”

“Shut! UP!” screamed Hina. “Just shut up!” She glared at him, fists clenched at her side as the tears began to pour.

“Quit talkin’ to her like that!” said Mondo. “Apologize to her!”

“For what?”

“Mondo is correct! Your actions are our of line! Apologize for speaking to her the way you do!” said Taka. “Have you no decency? Her friend is—”

“Dead!” screamed Hina. “She’s dead. Sakura is dead, and she’s not coming back. That’s me, the one with the d—dead friend, now can everyone stop talking about me like I’m not here?”

“Say, is Hina crying again?”

A familiar skin-crawling voice came from the overhead speakers.

All heads turned to the podium, our familiar captor springing out with a sickening grin we knew all too well.

“You!” said Leon, posture already on the defense.

“Ah, me,” said Monokuma with a sigh and a flutter of his hand. “Are really to rumble? Where’s Kyoko?”

“I am here.”

And all of sudden, she was, standing near the back entrance as if she’d been there all along.

“Fantastic!” He cackled. “And for the record, what Hiro heard wasn’t the sound of construction…”

We waited.

“W-well?” asked Toko. “Go on!”

“I am pausing for dramatic effect,” said Monokuma, ruining any possible suspense he had been aiming for anyway by spelling it out for us. “Dun dun dun… It could have been the sound of an explosion!” He mock gasped. “Or maybe a machine gun!”

The thought of something as horrific as an explosion or a machine gun left me speechless, stuck to
the horrors of my imagination. Even if it wasn't true, just the thought of it was unbearable.

“What on earth…” said Makoto. “What are you talking about?”

“Ah-ah-ah! Beyond this point my mouth is zipped, my lips are sealed, I am fully puckered!”

“Enough,” said Kyoko. “Why did you bring us here?”

“Puhuhuhu! A little short-tempered are we? Very well, I will be frank. I’m not happy. Not happy at all. The next blackened hasn’t shown up yet, and I’m getting booooooooored! So I figured, what you kids need is a new motivation! Quite brilliant, if I do say so myself.”

“What the hell?” asked Makoto. "You’re not showing us any more videos, are you?"

“I don’t know what you’ve got planned, but we’re not going to kill each other anymore!” said Taka. "No matter what you do, I swear to God we won’t!”

“Well, aren’t you speaking all grown-up like you’re in charge?” said Monokuma with a grin even more smug than usual. “Awful self-centered, don’tcha think? We’ll see if you can keep that promise, Mr. Tough Guy. Drumroll, please! The motive this time is… embarrassing memories and secrets!”

What?

Makoto looked wary. “What do you—”

Monokuma was alight with glee. “As long as you’re alive, it’s a given that there’s things you don’t want people to know about you! So I did a little investigating of my own, and I dug up some of your darkest secrets!” He brandished a hand of tiny envelopes. “And those embarrassing memories and secrets are all contained right here!”

He tosses the envelopes at our feet. Each had a name written across the front, so I found the one with my name and quickly snatched it up.

Hands shaking, I struggled to pull out the note inside, but when I read it:

*Mukuro left her sister behind when she ran off to live with her mother.*

My blood went cold.

A memory long suppressed and half forgotten emerged from deep within me. A train, a choice, two parents… and one sister left behind. *No one can know about this,* was my first thought, but getting a better grip, I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut. Maybe, doing that I could fight back the tears and the white hot shame in the pit of my stomach.

I heard the cries of shock from the others, mirroring how I felt on the inside. All of a sudden, restless voices and uneasy questions at once.

“H-How…?” said Hina.

“How’d you find out about this?” cried Taka, staggering back and eyes wide.

“What the fuck is this?” said Mondo.

Even Byakuya was shaken. “Impossible! H-How? How could you possibly know—”

Monokuma cackled. “You have 24 hours! If someone doesn’t become blackened by then… all your
deepest, darkest, most embarrassing secrets will be exposed to the world!” He was jumping up and down in excitement. “Maybe I’ll roll by a crowded intersection in a van strapped with loudspeakers and spill the beans!” He was salivating; at least I was pretty sure it was saliva. “Kyaaah! Wouldn’t that be sooo embarrassing?”

“You’re wrong!”

To see Makoto stand defiant in the fact of our captor, it shouldn’t have been unexpected. All this time, he’d never faltered, never stopped believing in us. Yet his conviction continued to surprise me. Even those among us with the stronger constitutions looked far too shaken to say much of anything.

“Nobody is going to murder someone over this!”

Monokuma slumped sadly. “Oh no… Really? This is kinda depressing. I have stuff I would never want the world to know, so I figured you guys would be the same way. Is it really true? Am I getting nothing?”

I couldn’t tell if he was faking or not.

He turned away from us, posture still deflated in feigned resignation. “Okay, then in 24 hours, I’ll expose all your secrets just to make myself feel a little better!”

With an almost convincing look of depressed dejection on his face, Monokuma receded into the gym’s depths.

Makoto took a deep breath, looking around at the other students. “How is everyone doing?” At seeing the expression on everyone’s faces, he muttered. “R-Right. That was a stupid question.”

“A-Alright,” said Taka. “We are all struggling to grasp the situation, but! I have a great idea I am positive just might work!” He managed a smile, but it held none of the self-congratulatory notes present in his tone.

“O-Okay…” said Makoto.

“I propose that we all confess our secrets right now!” said Taka. “If we do that, any and all motive for murder will vanish!” He paused. “I… I realize this will not be easy, but I think this is the smartest option we have. Best to rip it off like a bandaid, right?” He laughed, and he remained as loud as ever, but there was something strained about it.

“As much as I don’t like it…” said Makoto. “It might be our best shot. I don’t want to, but I… I’m willing to share if everyone can agree!”

“I will go first!” said Taka. “So, my embarrassing thing is—”

“Oooooh, shut it, will you?” said Toko. “No—Nobody wants t-t-to hear your—hear your stupid—your stupid story!”

“W-What?” asked Taka.

“Are you kidding me?” asked Junko. “This is the best you can some up with? Fuck it. Hey, Scholarship, maybe leave the thinking to the ones who weren’t selected from a lottery.”

“Wha—What do you…” He staggered back as though visibly wounded by her words. “I didn’t mean, I was just trying to help!” said Taka. His eyes began to well up, and he wiped at them with his jacket sleeve before the tears could really start streaming.
“Hey, lay off, alright?” said Leon, surprising me by playing sympathetic this time around.

For being relatively normal, you'd think he'd be easy to read from a mile off. Still, he wasn't difficult... the guy was an open book. It was more like he was a bit of a wild card.

“This is all kinds of layers of fucked up,” he continued, "and you’re just gonna make everything way worse.”

“Alright, well, if you like the idea so much, why don’t you go first, prettyboy?” challenged Junko, folding her arms and staring him down. “Go ahead, we’re all ears.”

Leon chuckled--in the same way he always did when he was nervous. “Me? Heh, see, well, the thing is that it’s kinda not something I’m super keen on sharing, so…”

“That’s literally the entire point of the secrets in the first place,” said Byakuya.

“Yeah, but the thing about going first…”

“Awww, is someone scared?” said Junko, smirking.

I was surprised she was antagonizing him so mercilessly. I supposed it was in her nature. Just because the two of them seemed to get getting along over the last couple days didn't mean he would be even close to spared when Junko decided to bare her claws.

I stood beside her to lay a hand on her shoulder. “Junko. Arguing will only make it worse,” I said, and I tried to sound strong despite my shaky tone. I was still reeling from earlier, and I was sure I must’ve looked as bad as I sounded. I was humiliated at the idea of telling Junko my secret. Would she remember? Would she hate me? But if it meant keeping everyone safe—if it meant keeping her safe—I would do it.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. “Look. I don’t want to do this either, but I’m willing to put my feelings aside if it’ll keep everybody safe.” I stared intently at Junko, hoping that she could understand. I silently pleaded with her for forgiveness. Keeping her alive was my main priority. All else had to come after. “I say if we get a majority agreement, then we should go forth, no matter hard it is. Does that sound okay?”

“I’m with Mukuro,” said Kyoko.

As surprised as I was by her support, I was also grateful. Our eyes met, and I nodded a thank you to her.

“Th-That sounds fair,” said Makoto. “Any other thoughts?”

“I mean,” began Hina, “this is gonna be super embarrassing, but nobody has anything they’d actually kill over, right? Trust me, I’m not exactly excited about the whole idea, but if nobody else dies, it’d be worth it… right?” She shuddered. "That… that trial… I don’t want to go through anything like that ever again.”

“Y-Yeah, now that I think about it,” said Leon, “I think we oughta just get this over with.”

“I’m game if everyone else is,” said Hiro.

“I d-d-don’t care what—what any of you h-have to—have to say about—have to say ab-bout me,” said Toko. “I don’t want t-to talk about it. I d-d-don’t care what you think, I don’t want to talk about mine!” She began to tug--no, yank--at her braids as she usually did when she was anxious, voice
loud and shrill and a little pathetic. Despite the revulsion in her eyes as she glared at us, I felt a pang of sympathy for her.

“T-Toko, it’s okay—” began Makoto, but he was interrupted by Celeste.

“I’m afraid that I am going to have to side with Toko,” said Celeste, with a forlorn frown. “I feel that it would be quite impossible to share mine as well.”

“I second,” said Hiro.

“What are you talking about?” said Leon. “Literally just two seconds ago you were a ‘yes’!”

“I’m playing it by ear,” said Hiro. “Gotta go with my gut on this one. I know when I’m outnumbered.”

“Make up your mind already!” said Leon.

“Guys!” said Hina, managing surprising volume and clarity. She could be commanding at times. At least she had recovered from her tears. Maybe the authoritative voice she’d picked up was a cue from... from Sakura. “Let’s not fight, okay?”

“Hina is right,” said Makoto. “This is exactly what the mastermind wants!”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned there’s no need to continue. I’m begrudged to agree with the others,” said Byakuya. “There’s no need to discuss it.” By this time, he had recovered from his state of panic and was back to his usual disinterested self. “So we can give up on this ridiculous idea.”

“Right, because everything is all about you, now?” said Leon.

“I’m sorry, isn’t it always?” said Junko.

Kyoko cut in. “I’m surprised we’re getting so many protests.”

Junko scoffed. “Get the fuck out of here, Kyoko. You never tell us anything.”

“I don’t like this, but I’d much prefer to tell everyone myself than to have it revealed against my will. I figured there would be more people who see it this way.”

“Like you don’t have something to hide, Ultimate Soldier,” said Junko. “How do we know you’re secret isn’t your body count?”

I cut in. “Junko, that’s enough.”

Kyoko stiffened. “Well... If that is how it is going to be... I’ll leave it up to the rest of you to decide whether we come forth with our secrets. Or not.”

“Well, if you want to know all my dark and dirty secrets, I’m afraid you guys are gonna have to keep dreaming. I mean, are you kidding? No way in hell am I doing this,” said Junko.

I frowned. “Come on, Junko. This is important.”

She gave me a look. “Yeah, and it’s important that I don’t humiliate myself. Why can’t you back me up just for once!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, the hurt of her accusation mingling with the already building weight of the secret on my chest, making me feel even worse than before.
“You’re supposed to have my back!” There was no stopping her as she screamed at me, voice ringing throughout the gym as everyone watched with uncomfortable expressions. “You always do this! Why can’t you be on my side?”

“I’m on your side! I just—”

“I can’t believe you. Fine then, side with Kiyotaka the Pity Invite, but I’m not telling anyone shit. Some of us have actual careers on the line, you know? But I doubt that’s something he’d be thinking about. I’d probably die of shock if Mr. Lottery Pick has anything noteworthy to hide.”

“Hey, fuck off!” said Mondo, posture going into the defense immediately. “I don’t see any of you guys offering any better ideas! So unless you come up with some brilliant solution, why don’t you just shut the fuck up already?”

Taka had stopped crying, but he looked a real mess. “Mondo?”

Mondo sighed, hanging his head and avoiding his bro’s eyes. “You know I always got your back, bro, but… If everyone is so against it, there’s not much I can do. Besides, ‘s much as I hate to admit it… she’s gotta point. Some of us have more at stake, ya know?”

Taka nodded. “F-Fine,” he said. “I—I trust your judgement. Forget what I said, it was… it was beyond stupid. I am ashamed for even proposing it!”

“It wasn’t stupid, Taka,” I said. “Frankly, I think it would be better for all of us to take charge of our own narratives, rather than leaving them in the hands of that… that monster.” I practically spat out the word. I hated even thinking about him. “But…” I took a deep breathe, my mind made up. “I’m afraid if Junko doesn’t want to, then… I’m not going to leave my sister’s side on this.”

“V-Very well,” said Taka.

“Chihiro? Sayaka?” I asked. “You both have been awful quiet on this one.”

Chihiro bowed her head solemnly. “Sorry, Taka. I… I can’t. N-Not right now.” She blinked back tears. “But, I promise I won’t leave things like this,” she said, her her voice surprisingly resolute. “I wish I was strong enough to tell you all, but… I’m not. Not yet. When I’m stronger, that’s when I will tell you.”

“It’s okay, Chihiro,” I said, not wanting her to cry. I’d privately hoped we’d get more support of Taka, so that we could still possibly go through with it, but she seemed on the verge of a breakdown. Allowing that to happen definitely would have been counterproductive. Instead, I turned to the last person. “Sayaka?”

She hadn’t said a single word since Monokuma announce the new motive, and it wasn’t until now that I realized she was trembling.

“Sayaka?”

Her face was completely ashen, eyes wide but appearing to see nothing.

“Sayaka, what’s the matter?” asked Hina.

She just shook her head, shrinking in on herself. She looked so small and helpless, a part of me felt a strong urge to go to her. To comfort her.

“Leave her alone,” said Junko. “What could anyone possibly have on perfect little Sayaka, anyway?
Even the mastermind of all evil.”

I hated seeing her like this, but I agreed. At the very least, we could back off. Maybe then she could recover. “Y-Yeah, I think that’s enough for now.”

“Th-That’s okay,” said Taka. “It’s just a few secrets, I’m sure nobody’s about to kill anybody over it.”

“Me, too,” said Makoto. “We’re stronger than this. I… I’m choosing to believe in friends. I know you’re good people. We’re strong, and the mastermind is going to pay for this. We need to be standing together. Even if we’re not at the point where we can admit these secrets to each other… We all have until tomorrow to prepare for the reveal, okay? You’re not alone. If you need help in any way, don’t be afraid to come to me.”

Makoto’s eyes met mine and I nodded in reassurance. Still, the fear that had begun to settle continued to gnaw at my insides. But I could only hope that his belief was correct.

Of course, Byakuya was here to ruin the mood.

“Well, I suppose we’ll see, won’t we? I wouldn’t be so certain. You’re kidding yourself if you only judge others by your own narrow perspective.”

“Oh, kinda like how you’ve spent this whole time being an ungodly ginormous prick to the rest of us?” said Junko, eyeing him shrewdly.

Before they could argue any further, Hiro interrupted. “Guys, come on! This is insane! What the hell is going on?” he asked, looking around at the others in astonishment. “This isn’t serious, right?”

Celeste sighed. “And instantly you go to the state of denial.”

“For fuck’s sake, Hiro!” said Junko. “We literally just had a whole argument about it! You were involved!”

“Hey!” said Hiro. “That’s not what I mean, and you know it! I mean, think about it! This is banana peels, even for me! How’d the mastermind even get his hands on this kind of information?”

“I swear to god if you suggest it’s the work of the fey I’m killing everyone in this room and then myself,” muttered Junko.

“Don’t be mean! Come on, I’m being serious here! Who has this kind of power?”

“Joke all you want, he’s asking the right questions,” I said.

“Someone with enough power to prevent our rescue and get their hands on the darkest secrets of every person in this room?” asked Chihiro. “I wonder…”

“My thinking is that it might be some sort of cult,” said Hiro. When he only received mystified looks, he clarified. “You know, some sort of brainwashed end-of-the-world death cult trying to send a message! The kind that rounds up people for torture and human sacrifice!”

“God, you are the worst,” said Junko, groaning and rubbing her forehead.

“Well, do you think it could be…” said Chihiro, and I waited for her to say something but she seemed to have changed her mind. “Never mind.”

“Let’s hear it,” said Kyoko.
“Oh, o-okay,” said Chihiro. “I just think, even if it’s not a cult, the mastermind being someone with a thirst for blood might not be a complete stretch…”

“I see what you mean,” said Kyoko. “Are you referring to anyone in particular?”

“W-Well,” said Chihiro, going at little red at everyone’s eyes on her. She probably wasn’t used to the attention. “I’ve been doing a lot of reading on unsolved cases,” she began, “So… do you think our captor could be a serial killer?”

Silence. Everyone looked at each other.

A serial killer?

“Holy shit,” whispered Junko.

“Wh-What do you mean, Chihiro?” asked Hina.

“I—I know it sounds ridiculous, but—”

“Are you suggesting that a serial killer would have the motive and drive to lock up and torture students such as ourselves?” asked Celeste. “As far fetched as it might be, I will admit your theory does have… some form of compelling logic.”

“Perhaps it’s a stretch,” said Chihiro. “But there are articles in the library on serial killer, and and there seem to be some that might fit the profile. Sparkling Justice and Genocide Jack, for instance, so —”

“So then our warden is the Ultimate Murderous Fiend?” asked Byakuya. He had a wicked glint in his eye that sent a chill down my spine. “Your evidence is practically nonexistent, but the idea is certainly interesting.” He chuckled.

“God, I changed my mind, you are the worst,” said Junko. “I’ll take the paranoid conspiracy theorist over the emotionally stunted incel.”

Before those could devolve into an argument again, a stern voice interrupted.

“That’s enough,” said Kyoko. She folded her arms, stern gaze piercing as ever. “It’ll soon be tomorrow. I suggest everyone take the time they need to prepare.”

“Y-Yes,” said Makoto. “So don’t do anything hasty.”

I was left with an anxiety that couldn’t shake, but… we left things as they were, and left things as they lay. One by one, we headed back to our rooms.

Once in the hall, I turned to my sister. “Junko…”

Junko turned away. “Don’t talk to me,” she said, clearly still angry with me over our earlier argument.

Before I could say any more, she stormed off.

Left alone, I returned to my room.

Chapter End Notes
I love you all! Writing is hard! Mukuro & Hiro is a good friendship that has no basis in canon but i love it!

Please comment! Criticism or just something very short, i really don't care, comments give me life!
Chapter 2.4: Sparkling or Still?

Chapter Summary

Investigation time! Can Mukuro piece together the puzzle?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for disappearing on you guys! I swear I'm alive. I've been busy as all hell, and investigations are definitely the most difficult chapters for me to write.

Waking up to the blaring morning announcement, I clung desperately to my pillow. The expected haranguing of Monokuma’s grating voice was as unwelcome to my ears as ever. I groaned and curled up beneath my blankets, for once feeling too poor to rise. Just five more minutes. Five more minutes to sit and not be personable. Five more minutes in which I could refuse my reality--one of captivity and surveillance and danger.

No secrets. No death.

“Get ready to greet another beautiful day!”

I groaned, grabbing a pillow and throwing it at the monitor out of pure frustration. The gesture was meaningless, but it just felt right.

“I hope everyone got their beauty sleep because today is going to be quite the full schedule!”

What the hell does that mean?

I shot up, realizing I needed to get to the dining hall. I sped through my routine, practically hopping into mismatched socks in my rush to be out the door and find out what happened. My hands were shaking, making the endeavor take even longer than normal. Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, my face was ghostly pale. It was a non-issue compared to the thought of what could be waiting for us, so I put it from my mind as I headed out the door and into the cafeteria.

Only a handful of the usual crowd was present when I entered the room. Each had a look of apprehension on their face--except Byakuya, who I was surprised to see at all.

We made eye contact upon my entering. “Well, someone decided to finally show up,” he said.

“Don’t say it like that,” said Hina, giving him a sharp look. She looked to me with a relieved sigh. “It’s a good thing you’re here.”

“Why?”

Hina bit her lip.
Instead of answering, Leon cut in, slinging an arm over her shoulder. “Because she’s alive with us instead of embracing the sweet release of death, is that what you were going to say, Hina?”

Despite his usual carefree behavior, his manner seemed rather strained. In another circumstance, I definitely would have attributed his behavior to him trying to make a move, but today it seemed invasive, maybe even purposely so. It was as if he was trying to make her squirm.

“Ugh, stop it!” Whatever he was aiming for, it seemed to work. She grimaced in disgust, shrugging out from under his arm.

He let out an uncomfortably high pitched laugh, smile uncharacteristically forced. “I mean, why should I? That’s what it is, isn’t it? Another person lost their shit and we’re gonna find someone’s disassembled limbs underneath the floorboards, because that’s the kind of shit school we signed up for.” He was hyperactive, on edge. “Why did I even decide to come here. I didn't ask for this. Normal teenagers start garage bands and get girlfriends, apparently that would've been much for me!”

“Nobody's dead, we don’t know that for sure--” said Hina as the same time that Celeste asked him, “You’ve read the Tell Tale Heart?”

Leon threw his hands up in the air, crying out in frustration. “I go to a school for crazy people!”

In the far corner of the room, I spotted Sayaka in quiet, rapt conversation with Toko. Upon meeting my eyes, she gasped so loud I could hear it across the room, rushing over to me in an instant.

“Mukuro!”

At once, I was ambushed by a crushing hug.

“Thank goodness, you're alright!” Her voice was muffled, face buried in my chest.

I could feel my face growing hot. “O-Of course I am,” I said, unsure what to do with my hands, so I settled for patting her awkwardly on the back. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

It was a stupid question; I knew it as soon as the words escaped my mouth. Considering yesterday’s events, there was plenty reason to be worried.

“What’s wrong?” I tried again, more forcefully this time.

She looked up at me, face white as sheet. “I’m worried something terrible has happened!”

“What on Earth is going on?” I asked, looking around the room. “Where is everybody?”

My heart stopped, realizing a specific someone was missing.

“Where is Junko?”

Byakuya sighed, speaking in the same unenthusiastic droll as always. “Someone fill her in. I’m going to see what is the matter.”

Leon stood in his way. “Ah, Ah, Ah.” He wagged a finger. “What’s magic word?” he asked, purposely antagonizing Byakuya in a way that he would normally never try.


“M-Me?” asked Toko.
“Fill me in on what?” I asked, but Byakuya ignored me.

Byakuya rolled his eyes. “Just do it. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Leon snorted. “And without insulting us once. Impressive. That’s... almost growth.”

“Fill me in on what?” I asked again.

“What the heck, guys!” said Hina. “Stop freaking her out. Mukuro, everything is probably fine.”

“Probably?” I asked.

“I just don’t want anyone to get too ahead of themselves. I mean, no one would do anything crazy, right? Over just a couple of secrets…”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that. I mean, who knows what people are desperate to hide. After all, do any of us really know each other?” Byakuya smirked, an attitude inappropriate for the circumstance, but expected of someone as twisted as him. Then he waved us off in a manner that somehow managed to be condescending. Nevertheless, it was a surprising gesture of acknowledgement before leaving the room for good.

“B-Byakuya, wait!” said Toko, but he was already gone.

Leon whistled, running his fingers through his hair. “Sure do know how to make a girl feel special,” he muttered. “Why do I suddenly want to win his approval?” He looked to Toko. “Look, Specs, is it weird I almost see where you’re coming from? If he keeps turning on the charm like that, I just might fall in love.”

Hina shook her head. “Ugh, I honestly can’t tell if you’re joking. Your taste is... questionable.”

“That’s right,” said Celeste. “As opposed to you. As I would recall, you seem to prefer gang members and murderers.”

Hina glared at her before relenting, eyes instead turned to the floor. “It’s not like that,” she muttered. “Sakura has—had—a boyfriend.”

Leon whistled. “Home-wrecker Hina. No judgements here.” He paused a moment before looking away at the floor, seemingly avoiding everyone’s eyes on purpose as he laughed weakly. “And, uh, I-I was joking. Totally.”

“D-don’t know, man,” said Hiro, who didn’t seem to be paying attention to the last couple of seconds. “I’m telling you, guy gives me some serious bad vibes. Pursue at your own risk, but I’m betting the dude’s a serial killer or something… or worse, some kind of pod person.”

Leon ignored Hiro’s usual ramblings, turning to look at the rest of us. “What do you think? Is it just me, or was anybody else feeling a little bit of a gay vibe?”

Hina gaped at him. “Is now really the time for that?” she asked. “Inappropriate!”

“Hey! Just throwing it out there. It’s called a sense of humor.”

“B-b-back off!” said Toko. “All of you, j-just--”

“Gross!” said Hina, recoiling and wrinkling her nose in disgust. “As if I would ever be interested in someone like him.”
“Uh, yeah,” said Hiro, putting up a hand as if trying to ask a question. Instead, he went ahead and spoke. “Can we not rope me in this? First of all…” He held up a hand, doing the “cut it out” gesture across this neck. “Yikes. You guys are toddlers, and I’d appreciate not being seen as a cradle-snatcher, yeah? Second--”

“Oh my god! Can we focus?” said Hina, yelling to get everyone’s attention, voice ringing throughout the dining hall.

Celeste cleared her throat. “Pardon my--ahem--my intrusion,” she said, eyes glancing between myself and Sayaka--who was still holding me. The corner of her lip twitched in a small smirk before she regained her composure. “But as my companions have suggested, we have reason to believe something has gone amiss.”

At Celeste’s looks, Sayaka hastily let go of me, but remained close. I could feel her still clinging to my arm. I felt sick, wanting to wipe that smirk right off Celeste’s face. Our close contact was making my stomach churn, but if it meant being a source of comfort for Sayaka, of course, I wanted to be there for her.

“Toko,” said Celeste, “I believe you were designated with the explanation?”

“R-Right,” she said. “S-Some of the--of the others have--have g-g-g-g-g---” began Toko, but Hina cut her off in her impatience.

“Ugh! You’re taking too long!”

“Hey--!” Toko tried to protest, but Hina ignored her.

“What she’s trying to say is that some of the others have gone to see what’s wrong,” said Hina. “Also…” She fidgeted in place, looking hesitant to continue.

“Hina,” I said, my voice warning, sure she was hiding something from me. “Tell me.”

“Well…” The words came tumbling out. “Some people didn’t show up this morning, so this whole thing is a bit of a jumbled mess. We kinda have no idea who is missing and who is searching the school--”

“Whoa, slow down, what do you mean?” I asked. “Does that mean--have you seen Junko?”

Hina frowned. “W-Well, no, but--”

“So nobody has seen Junko?”

The silence was killing me.

I backed away, wide-eyed, realization and horror crashing down on me. “You know what, I have to go. I need to find my sister.”

Already out the door, I heard the sound of rushed footsteps behind me.

“Mukuro!” the person called, and I instantly recognized it as Sayaka.

I didn’t stop, but she caught me by the hand. Reluctantly, I turned to her.

“Mukuro…” She paused, taking a moment to catch her breath. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be walking around here at a time like this.” Her big blue eyes were wide, expressive… fearful. Whether it was fear for herself or for me, I had no idea.
“What do you mean?”

“Well…” She lowered her voice, despite the fact that nobody else was around. “We could be in
danger, you know?”

My patience was growing thin. “We’ve been in danger. I can handle myself.” I pulled my hand out
of hers.

“No, I got that! You can take care of yourself.” She frowned, hugging her arms close to her chest. In
that moment, she looked so small. What would a girl like her do if left to her own devices? “I--I’m
sorry if I’m just being a huge distraction. You have other problems.”

I sighed, rubbing my forehead. “I’m sorry… I guess I’m just a bit on edge.”

“That’s okay.”

Just thought of her walking around all by herself…

“You know what, you’re probably right. I don’t want you walking around by yourself either.” I
reached for her wrist. Upon grabbing her arm, she flinched, wincing and drawing her hand back.


“No, it’s fine,” she said, but she was still wincing, massaging her forearm.

I offered my hand out to her again in an act of forgiveness. “Come on.”

She smiled, and I knew she was reassured.

--

We ran into Chihiro near the entrance hall. She seemed distracted, but catching her attention, she
looked up at us with those wide eyes of hers, managing a small smile. At the same time, she was
wringing her hands anxiously.

“Good morning, Chihiro,” said Sayaka with a courteous smile, a little more forced than usual. It was
clear the mood was anxious all around.

“Oh, hello,” said Chihiro with a small nod of acknowledgement. “Good morning to you, too. At
least, I hope for a good morning…”

I didn’t like that ominous note, so thankfully Sayaka continued before she could leave it hanging.

“Have you seen Junko?” asked Sayaka. “We’ve been looking for her.”

“Uh…” She pondered for a moment. “Yeah, I--I think. I just saw her go up the stairs a moment ago.”

*But that meant…*

“Are you sure?” I asked, now very intent.

“Pretty sure,” said Chihiro in a small voice, seeming to shrink under my gaze. “I-I’m sorry I couldn’t
be of more help…”

I let out a sigh of relief. I couldn’t rest until I at least knew for sure, but it was enough for me to
exhale.
“Thank you so much, Chihiro,” said Sayaka, waving and already leading me away. “Did you hear that?” she asked, looking to me. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

I nodded, still trying to calm myself. My reassurance couldn’t last forever. I didn’t know it yet, but upstairs a nightmare was waiting for us.

I was still searching desperately for Junko, checking room after room.

The first classroom was empty. The second classroom was empty. I was about to check the door to the girl’s locker room when I heard Sayaka shiver.

I tried the door. “These are supposed to be locked…”

Peeking inside, I could see the room was empty.

“Oh, god, tell me what’s inside,” she said, averting her eyes.

“No here,” I said to her.

She nodded, shivering again. “I think we should go,” she said.


“What is it?” she asked.

“Do you think we should check the boys room?” I asked.

“For Junko?”

“No, I--Just… just in case, you know? In case something…”

She frowned. “I don’t think we can.”

A bell went off, and we heard the sound of static before the monitors came on. “For this investigation, I have unlocked the doors. Please look around to your heart’s content!” said Monokuma in his usual unbearable screech before disappearing once again.

The screen cut out, and Sayaka and I stared at each other in silence.

“What do you think that means?” she whispered, clinging close to me.

“I guess we’ll know soon.”

I was trying to be brave, but there was a knot forming in the pit of my stomach. I already knew what it meant.

She nodded, trying to edge me toward the door. “You go.”

“Doesn’t necessarily mean it’s meant for us,” I said. I looked to the nearest camera. “Please, don’t shoot.” I tried a silent prayer. *Monothing, if we made a mistake, please don’t blow our head off with a machine gun.*

Then I tried the door, and much to my dismay, it creaked open.

In that moment, time seemed to freeze. All I could see was a body and the pool of blood. I couldn’t comprehend what I was looking at; it was as if the world seemed to turn and crash around me, blood
coursing in my ears as I rushed to the victim’s side.

Behind me in the doorway, Sayaka let out an ear-splitting, wild, almost primeval scream—echoing through the halls in a way that made it feel neverending.

I fell to my knees, the body lying on the floor beside me.

“Makoto!” I cried out, not sure if it was said out of shock, or surprise, or if I desperate for a response. “Makoto!” I could hear the panic rising in my voice.

_No! No, no, no, no, no no. Not him. Anyone but him._

I scanned the body, checking for any signs of life. He looked completely still. No movement. Brain going into overdrive as my instincts took over, I leaned in close to his face. No breathing. No rising and falling of the chest. His eyes were closed like he could have fallen asleep, but he was deathly pale.

Trying to keep my hands from shaking, I reached out, trying to feel for a pulse. He was unusually cold, body already going stiff.

_Nothing._ Hoping maybe it was the spot I picked, I tried again on his neck. Again nothing.

I fell back, feeling the world collapse for a second time. Judging by the chill of his skin, it had already been hours.

There was… nothing we could do.

I could hear Sayaka blubbering behind me. “Oh my god, oh my god, should I--should I get someone? I--I don’t know what to do, Mukuro, talk to me, I--”

I didn’t answer, still too in shock to really register anything that was happening. I could barely wrap my head around it. Something about it, about Makoto, the kindest, sweetest, most genuine person I’d ever met, my good friend… lying still on the ground. Something about it didn’t seem real. It couldn’t be real. And yet in the blur of everything that was going on, the sound of voices in the background, the floor that seemed to sway and fall out from beneath me, it was the only thing that felt real at all.

“What in the… I heard screaming! What the hell is going on?”

A new voice, too distant in my shattered mind to register, came from behind me in the doorway. I didn’t turn around or say anything.

“Sayaka!” It was Leon. “Oh my god, I heard you screaming! Are you okay?”

Finally coming back to reality, I glanced over at the pair of them in my stupor. Leon was holding Sayaka, her face buried in his chest in a tight hug. He was trying to comfort her. I felt sick to my stomach.

“I’m so glad you’re okay…” he said to her. His eyes met mine, then fell to the body laying on the ground.

“What the fuck?” he cried out, eyes going wide with shock as he staggered back. “What the hell is going on? Is that blood?” Looking closer, he added, “Is that… Is that Makoto?”

“I-Is he dead?” asked Sayaka, still hovering close to Leon.

Before I could answer, the bell went off. We all turned to the monitor.
“A body has been discovered!” said Monokuma. “After a certain amount of time, which you may use however you like, the class trial will begin!”

The screen blacked out.

We looked to each other. The air was heavy, the mood possibly even more grim.

Sayaka spoke. “So that means…”

I nodded. “He’s dead,” I said, lifeless, unable to muster even the semblance of emotion into my words.

Sayaka began to sob into Leon’s shoulder.

“Oh no, Sayaka, please don’t cry,” said Leon. He raised a hand hesitantly before patting her on the back, looking back and forth between her and the door. “Look, I, uh… I gotta go get some of the others, but I’ll be back asap, okay?” He shot her one last look of concern before backing away and sprinting out the door.

Thankfully, he didn’t take long. Everyone was quickly gathered, quiet murmurs and horrified gasps rippling through the growing crowd.

“Makoto!” cried out Taka. “I never imagined…This is—!”

“No! Not Makoto!” Hina’s wide-eyed face was ashen. “Why? Why is this happening? Why are we being put through this again?” She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve.

“Fuck, man,” said Mondo, a rare moment of quiet in his disbelief. He hung his head, fists clenched tightly at his sides. “Poor kid…”

“No!” whispered Kyoko. Even she seemed more shaken than usual.

“Mukuro?”

A familiar voice cut through my haze. I turned to see my sister standing in the doorway, staring at me with a bewildered expression.

“Junko!”

I stood up, running toward her as she did the same--barreled into me for a tight hug, all previous grudges instantly forgotten. Relief washed over me in an instant.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I was in the library. I’m just glad you’re not dead. I--I mean…” she bit her lip, looking down at Makoto. She lowered her voice, shooting me a sympathetic look. “Sorry. I know you guys were close.”

“I mean…” I frowned. “Not really.”

It wasn’t like we had anything special. Even if I thought we had a real connection, he was just… nice. He had a way of making you feel listened to. Cared for. He was a real friend. A good kid.

I looked down at Makoto’s lifeless body.

He was so cold. So still.
It was unthinkable. Makoto was the kind of person to bring a smile to anyone’s face. He had never ending patience and kindness. The kind of person with a beaming smile that reached his eyes. His aura was infectious. The boy was just… sunshine incarnate. To think he was gone…

I shut my eyes, fighting back tears.

“This is horrible…” said Hina, voice breaking. “I--I hate this. I can’t believe we have to do this again.”

“Fuck this,” said Hiro. “I want out!”

“And where are you planning to go exactly?” asked Celeste.

“I don’t care, anywhere but here!”

“We’re in an enclosed space,” snapped Hina.

“We need someone to guard the scene,” said Kyoko, ignoring the beginnings of a quarrel and approaching the body.

“Jesus, a little soon,” said Leon. “I mean, not everyone is even here yet.”

“We’re already jumping into investigation?” asked Sayaka. “Shouldn’t we--”

“Trust me,” said Byakuya, “You’re going to need all the time you can get--”

Leon’s expression was dubious. “Yeah, because we should trust you.”

“Trust or not, time is valuable,” said Kyoko. “I realize this is tough for everyone, but we need to be pressing on.” When everyone turned to stare at her, she added, “If you want justice, this is the only way forward.”

After a moment’s silence, she added, “Now we’re going to try this again. Who is going to guard the scene?”

Mondo raised a hand. “I’ll do it,” he growled, his voice was low, solemn.

Taka looked to him. “Bro--”

He shrugged. “I did it last time. Everybody knows I’m no use at investigations, so I may as well try to help in some way.”

“Fine—” said Kyoko, but Byakuya interrupted.

“Last time someone offered to guard the scene, they ended up being the culprit,” he said.

Mondo went stiff, stance was already on the defensive. “You got somethin’ you wanna say?” asked Mondo through grit teeth.

“Hey!” cut in Taka loudly, stepping up to confront Byakuya. “Mondo has an alibi. He and I were—”

Mondo threw out a hand, holding back Taka. “Easy bro, I don’t need your help--”

“I don’t care what happened. Enough with the puppy love, we’ve had enough volunteers,” said Byakuya. “Let’s get someone else.”
“Yes, because we want to be combative and hostile towards those who are trying to be cooperative,” said Junko.

“Why not? Works for you, doesn’t it?” said Byakuya.

For a moment, Junko looked about ready to slap him. Instead, she smirked. “Wow, that was almost a clapback,” she said, her tone patronizing rather than actual praise.

“Oh my god,” said Kyoko, sighing and shaking her head. “We’re talking in circles. The more we argue, the less time we have.”


He snapped, pointing to Leon and gesturing for him to “come here”.

Leon gaped at him. “Did you really just… snap at me?”

Byakuya ignored him. “You’re watching the scene.”

Leon looked to the others like he couldn’t believe what was happening. “No, for real, did this guy just snap at me?”

“Perfect,” said Junko, ignoring Leon, “Let’s just force people into their jobs now. I’m sure he’ll super vigilant and happy to be here!”

“None of us are happy to be here,” Hina reminded Junko with a pointed expression.

They looked about to get into a full-fledged argument when Leon spoke.

“Whatever. No cat-fights. I can do it.” His voice was bitter.

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” said Junko.

I gulped, nodding. “Let’s go.”

“Whoa there,” said Leon, holding his hands up. “What’s up with the stone cold demeanor? Weren’t you two like super close?”

“Yes,” hissed Junko, leaning away from me and toward him as if that somehow would made it harder for me to hear. “They were. Now a little less talking and a little more guarding. Show a little sensitivity, it’s her job to be impartial. You wanna survive?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“You wanna live, right? Then let her do her job. Unless you killed him, of course.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” asked Leon.

Sayaka started sobbing again.

Byakuya rolled his eyes. “Someone comfort the wilting flower. I can’t stand the sound of her pathetic sniffing.”

Hina was quick to put a comforting arm around Sayaka, who continued to cry.

Junko looked to Byakuya. “God, you’re heartless,” she said in disgust. “Why, do you have to be
such an asshole? You can’t focus without recreating the feeling of tap-tap-tapping on your keyboard alone in your parents’ basement?”

“Junko—” I started, putting a hand on her shoulder, but she shoved my hand away.

“Don’t ‘Junko’ me,” she said. “Why do I always get the lecture?”

I just closed my eyes and shook my head, still too in shock to reason with anyone. I couldn’t do this. No arguments, not right now.

“Wh-What is g-g-going on? Wh-Why is--Why is everyone--everyone in here?”

A familiar stutter that had been noticeably absent had finally arrived.

I opened my eyes to see her standing in the doorway. Heads turned to look at her.

Toko was the last person to arrive. She seemed to shrink under everyone’s gaze, but spotting the body on the floor she paid us no more mind. Distracted, she approached Makoto’s body, eyes going wide in horror. “Is--Is that?”

“Makoto?” asked Byakuya. “Yes, it is. And it looks like another murder has occurred. It’s time for an investigation.”

“Wh-What is this?”

To my surprise, Toko stepped out from crowd of students, pushing past with surprising strength. Her gaze was fixed on something on the ground. Gingerly, she picked it up and examined something I had somehow completely missed in my shock.

“The hell?” asked Junko.

It seemed to be… a mask.

“No…” she whispered, gaze straying to the pool of blood at her feet and beside Makoto’s lifeless body. “It--It can’t be…”

“Toko, are you alright?” asked Hina.

Toko ignored Hina. She was deathly pale, eyes still wide like she’d seen a ghost. “No…. No no no no no no. No. Th-They wouldn’t… This--This isn’t happening!” She appeared to be talking to herself more than anyone else.

“Toko, maybe it’s best if we get you out of here…” said Hina.

Toko clutched her stomach, groaning and breathing heavily. “I… I think I’m g-gonna b-b-b-be s-sick!” she said, rocking back and forth until she finally keeled over. With a loud thud, she fell to the floor, passed out cold.

“What the fuck?” cried Mondo.

“Toko!” cried Taka. “Is she alright?”

Taka ran over to her side immediately.

“Toko!”
“Toko!” Hina knelt down next to her, trying to shake her awake. “She’s passed out. I think she’ll be okay… I hope.”

“It must’ve been the blood!” said Taka.

“What a pity,” said Celeste. “To be hemophobic in a situation such as this would be quite a disadvantage, I should think.” Even so, she didn’t sound sorry in the slightest.

“Oh, she’ll be alright,” said Byakuya. “And if she’s not, then who cares.”

Junko gave him a disgusted look. “On behalf of everyone here, I only have one thing to say to you, and that’s, uh, choke.”

“She’s not gonna get in trouble or anything, is she?” asked Hiro. “The last thing she needs is to be punished for sleeping outside of the dorms.”

“Well… The rules prohibit sleeping,” said Kyoko. “Whereas Toko fainted. Since she didn’t do it on purpose, she should be okay.”

“Okay, so we’re chillin’!” said Hiro.

“You call this ‘chilling?’” asked Hina, gesturing to Toko’s unconscious body.

“We can’t just leave her here,” said Leon.

“Toko!” Hina shook her roughly, still trying to rouse her awake. “Toko, you need to wake up!”

I was surprised at her forcefulness, the note of desperation in her voice. Toko hadn’t exactly been nice to her this whole time; still, Hina had a big heart.

Then…

As if she’d heard her, Toko suddenly shot awake. As in, she literally jumped from where she was laying. It was such a strange reaction, I was at a total loss for words. She leapt straight up in the air, changing her stance as she did. In no time flat she was just… up.

Ignoring the physical contortions she had to go through, her motions were totally haphazard.

“Huh?” asked Hina, taking a step back, watching Toko with wide eyes. “What is…”

“Sorry about that. It’s been so long!” Her posture and inflection were totally different. Louder, more assured. Despite her voice, her pale eyes were vacant.

“Uh, Toko? Are you alright?” asked Hina.

“Toko? What do you mean, Toko? Me? I’m fine! So fine! Kyehaha!” She let out a cackle unlike anything I’d ever heard. Her tongue lolled idly from her mouth, as if she had no control. Spotting Makoto on the floor, she let out another cackle. “Whoa! Is that a dead body!??” She bent over Makoto. “Hey! Are you dead?”

Strange. Somehow, her aversion to blood was completely gone.

“Kyehahahaha!” She sauntered absently around the room, speaking in a sing-song voice as she swayed her arms from side to side. “The world has a front and a back, a top inning and a bottom, a sea of truth and a web of lies!” She paid us no mind.
“Uh…. Anyone else getting a little concerned?” asked Hiro.

“No, no! Everything’s fine!” said Toko, still oddly carefree. “It’s been so long! I’ve been wanting to do this for a while. And besides, the stutter should be all gone! You’re welcome! That’s a good thing, right? Much better than her! You should like me much more now! Kyeehahaha!” Noticing the mask on the ground, she gasped. “Oh no! What’s this?” She cackled. “Uh-oh! She’s in trouble for sure!”

“It is apparent that you are not alright!” said Taka. To the others, he said, “Would someone help me escort Toko back to her room? It seems she could use someone as a watchful eye!”

After a moment’s awkward silence, Hina gulped, raising a hand. “I’ll do it. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you, Hina,” said Taka.

“Come on,” said Hina to Toko. Hina placing a coaxing hand at Toko’s shoulders, and guiding her out of the room.

Everyone was too distracted to notice Chihiro stepping out of the crowd and up beside the mask. She knelt, picking it up with one hand and turning it over and over in examination.

Once she’d left, the rest of us noticed Chihiro’s rapt fixation.

“Uh, Earth to Chihiro,” said Leon.

“Yo, kid,” said Mondo. “You in there?”

Chihiro didn’t respond, only stared at the mask intently, brow furrowed in fixed concentration.

“Could it be?” Then, she leapt up, louder and more urgent than I’d ever seen her in all my time here. “I… I’ve seen this before!” She bolted from the room as fast as her little legs could carry her.

Everyone looked at each other with questioning looks.

Leon whistled. “O-kay…”

“I suggest those who would like to start ought to go on ahead,” said Celeste. “Who knows how long she will take, yes?”

“S-Sure…”

From the hall, we could hear Toko cackle.

“I, uh…” Taka hesitated in the doorway, ready to head out. “Mukuro, as someone who will be absent for part of the investigation, I would like to know if you will provide your assessment of the body?” he asked.

I closed my eyes. “I’ll… I’ll get there, just give me a moment.”

“Of course!” said Taka. “I am sure this must be devastating! You must be allowed time to grieve! After all, I know you must have been very close.”

Junko shook her head, muttering under her breath. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“How sweet,” said Celeste. “Have you decided to work together as a unit? If only we could all be so trusting.” Judging by the twisted glint in her eye, she seemed to be mocking him.
“Oh, relax,” said Junko. “He’s just asking her opinion.”

“Just so everyone knows. I do prefer to… to investigate alone,” I managed to say, swallowing back the lump in my throat. I was fighting to suppress any thoughts of the previous investigation. It was true; while I was generally open to collaborating with others, I preferred to work alone. Makoto… He had been the exception, rather than the rule. “However,” I added hesitantly, “I’ll be… more than willing to answer anybody’s questions. How you take my input is entirely up to you.”

Taka nodded in thanks, leaving to assist Hina.

Finally left to my own devices, I grabbed my Monokuma File:

“The victim was Makoto Naegi. The time of death is estimated to be around 11 p.m. The body was discovered in the Boys Locker Room of the second floor of the school. The exact cause of death is unknown, but he appears to have suffered from asphyxiation and a punctured lung. Besides minor scratches on his face and neck, he suffered no other external injuries.”

I frowned. “That’s it?”

“What is it?” asked Junko.

“File,” I responded shortly, pointing at the screen.

Junko scoffed. “It’s so short.”

I sighed. “Well, if Monokuma wanted to make this easy for us, he wouldn’t be Monokuma.”

I performed a quick scan of the room. Spotting no nearby hazards, I could go right to the examination.

I took a deep breath, trying to regulate my heartbeat. Despite the morbid circumstances, I’d done this before; it was my occupation of choice, after all. Morbid was part of the job description. Still, the gloom hovered over us like a dark cloud.

I may have been more accustomed to the macabre than some of the others, but this was new to me.

I…

I’d never lost a friend in this way.

I knelt beside the body, hesitating to take a second of pause. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, as if he could hear me. Maybe deep down inside, I wanted to believe he still could. I took a moment of silence before finally proceeding.

…”

“Man, this place gives me the serious chills,” said Hiro, looking around the room, a shiver running down his spine as he clutched his arms.

“No one’s twisting your arm to stay,” said Junko, only half-listening as she knelt beside me—not even bothering to look up at him.

“Hey!” said Hiro. “I know that! But I--I dunno if I wanna be alone in a time like this!” His expression was uneasy as his eyes darted around the room. He was quiet for a moment, but it didn’t last long before he was at it again. “Hina!”
I looked up to see Hina standing in the doorway.

“How’s Toko?” he asked.

She frowned. “Uh… Not great, but Taka is keeping an eye on her.” There must have been something in my expression, because she added, “Mukuro, are you alright?”

“Huh?” I nodded, getting back to work.

“Mukuro, you look suuuuper checked out right now,” said Hiro after I’d been at it for a bit, breaking my concentration.

“What?” I asked, only somewhat paying attention.

“‘Kuro, what’s the dealio?’”

“Jesus, don’t say it like that,” said Hina. She was sitting beside him, and as he said this, she scowled and elbowed him in the ribs.

“And don’t call her ‘Kuro’, that’s my thing,” muttered Junko.

“Ow!” said Hiro, massaging his ribcage. “Hey, I just wanted to ask ‘Kuro what was up.”

On hearing the nickname again, I glanced up on a reflex. “Yeah?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah,” said Hiro, eyes wide as if surprised by my attention. “You had a real funny look on your face just now.”

“Did I? Huh.” Maybe that was a thing--me making odd faces. Nobody had ever said anything. It wasn’t like I had anyone besides my mom. I sighed, figuring I might as well let them know what was up. Maybe the extra brain-power could help. “Well, if you wanna know… the body checks out with the report, for the most part at least. Minor cuts on his face. The file calls them scratches, and they appear to be nail marks. But beyond that… no other external injuries.”

“So then why the weird face?”

“Seriously, what face?” I asked, bewildered.

“Ignore him, Mukuro,” said Hina. “He’s just being an ass.”

But Hiro ignored her, still looking at me and going on ahead anyway. “Uh… Kinda like this,” he said, squinting really hard as if in concentration while scratching his chin.

He looked so silly that I snorted on a reflex, even smiled.

Dumb as it was, for a moment--just a moment--I felt better. It was just a second, but it was enough to remind me the world wasn’t over just yet.

Junko looked to me, eyebrow raised, incredulous expression on her face. “Seriously?”

“Yo, I’m telling you, things were getting way too heavy, yeah?” said Hiro, proud grin on his face, eyes surprisingly sympathetic as he smiled at me.

Hiro reached a hand out to me, and I took it.

I felt him give my hand a reassuring squeeze.
Our eyes meeting, I managed a small smile in return. The sensation was tense, almost like I’d forgotten how to smile at all. Still, an unspoken word passed between us, my heart swelled.

I coughed, clearing my throat and letting go of his hand.

“It was a moment of weakness,” I said, not looking at Junko. The clawing pang in my chest was returning, ever present. I pouted and rolled my eyes, scolding him with no real malice. “Don’t distract me again, I need to concentrate.”

“Kay, but something was clearly bugging, so spill,” said Hiro.

Somehow, he could always just tell when something was wrong.

“Well, yeah,” I confessed. “the file said he suffered from of asphyxiation… I mean, it’s not impossible, but I still can’t find the source. There are no signs of choking or strangulation, so it’s probably not…” I trailed off, not bothering to voice my train of thought.

He nodded sagely, in a way that was almost comical. “I’m telling you, those files are misleading as fuck. I don’t trust anything Monokuma says.”

“Funny, you always gave off more of a ‘follow the leader’ kind of vibe to me,” snickered Junko.

“‘Scuse?” he asked.

“You know… I say ‘jump’, you say ‘how high?’” said Junko.

“Regardless,” I said, “I’m no more inclined to trust Monokuma than anyone else, but we have to start somewhere.”

“Sure, but it’s weird to think about what you just said,” said Hiro. “He’s messing with our heads, man.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Monokuma! Trust me, you don’t give out bad info unless you’re trying to fuck with someone. Doesn’t really fit, right?” said Hiro.

“Speaking of things not fitting,” said Junko, “That track suit is hella large, don’t you think?”

“Track suit?” asked Hina.

“The one Makoto is wearing,” said Junko, folding her arms in exasperation. “Use your eyes. You know, the ones in your head. There’s two of them.”

I nodded distractedly, staring at the blue track suit Makoto was wearing for a moment before rummaging through the pockets of his track jacket. I checked the first pocket. The only things I found was pocket lint and a single safety pin.

So nothing.

In his other pocket, I noticed his e-handbook sticking out. I pocketed it for safe-keeping.

Finished with the search, I unzipped his jacket.

“Jesus, Mukuro, a little discretion, maybe?” asked Hiro.
I ignored him. Junko was right, the track suit was strangely baggy on him.

“ Weird, I didn’t even know the guy worked out,” said Mondo, craning his neck to look over at us.

“Yeah… neither did I,” I said. I mean, he’d just never really seemed the type.

“You’d think he’d pick a suit his size,” said Hiro, crouching beside me.

“Yeah, you’d think…” I said. A thought struck me. “Hiro?”

“Mm?”

“Do you guys keep your track suits in the lockers?”

“Yeah, weird, some of the guys were just talking about working out the other day,” said Hiro. “Not Makoto, though.”


“What color is your track suit?”

“White!” he said, beaming with pride. “I can show you if you like.”

“Maybe later,” I said with a small nod, double-tasking as I examined Makoto’s chest at the same time. It sounded like I’d blown him off, so I added, “If it becomes important, I’ll let you know.”

“Gotcha.”

I scowled, fingers pressed up against Makoto’s chest.

“You’re making the face again,” said Hiro.

“Broken ribs,” I murmured, more to myself than to anyone else. I rolled Makoto onto his back, just to check something. No bruising or discoloration on his back.

“God,” said Hiro, wrinkling his nose and sniffing the air. “Not to be crass--”

“—but it reeks in here!” continued Hiro. “I mean, it’s not just me, right?”

“Nope,” said Leon. He’d been sitting on one of the benches, zoning out as far as I had been aware, but he seemed to be paying attention now. “Not just you, I’d recognize that smell anywhere.”

Hina’s eyes widened. “Chlorine!” she said, slamming her fist into her hand in a moment of epiphany.

“You can smell it from that far?” asked Junko.

“He’s just being a baby,” said Hina. “It’s not that strong. It’s coming from somewhere in here, can’t you tell?”

I nodded. It was muddled, but at least one of the sources came from Makoto’s hair. His hair was dry in texture and even more messy than usual, so it checked out. I was starting to get a vague picture on the broader situation at hand.

I did my last examinations on his body; once again, no external injuries, but there was bruising on his chest, and some on his arms and legs. That could mean possible signs of a struggle.
Aching to check the next room over to confirm my hunch, I stood up. Since the mention of the chlorine, I’d been curious to see if I could dig up anything extra in the pool room.

“Where are you going?” asked Sayaka—abrupt, panicked.

“Just the pool. If Leon and Hina are right about the chlorine, then I should definitely check. Junko?” I gave her a look.

“Coming!” she said, practically bounding over to me.

“I’ll go with you!” Sayaka quickly rushed over to my side.

“You should get some rest,” I said, but she ignored me, clinging to my side.

Stepping out, the deck was clear.

“I’m just gonna be a moment,” I said, not looking over at her.

She nodded, swallowing hard and taking deep breaths. “I know… It’s stupid, I know… It’s just hard being in there… I needed to get out.”

“No problem, it was getting all jammed in there,” said Junko.

I nodded in silence. She was right, it certainly was tough—more than tough; in moments it was almost insurmountable. But I had to put it from my mind. I needed to push forward.

Thankfully, there were no hazards or blood, but at least those would have been signs of use.

_Well, maybe I was wrong…_

I was about to head back when I heard the slightest splash. Looking down at my feet, I realized I had stepped in a small puddle of water.

_Weird._

Well, it was something. The deck should have been dry—unless the pool had been in recent use.

Peering into the water, I scowled in concentration. “The pool is too cloudy to see anything.”

Sayaka’s brow knit, expression perplexed. “That is so weird.”

Straining my eyes, I could maybe make out indistinct shapes at the bottom of the pool. “There’s something there.” I huffed in frustration.

“Why don’t you just jump in?” asked Hina. Upon hearing her voice, I turned to look at her. I hadn’t realized she’d followed us out.

“Wish I could help,” said Sayaka. “I’m a terrible swimmer.”

“I gotcha—” began Hina.

“Are you kidding?” called an incredulous male voice. “Don’t just fucking jump in the pool!”

Turning back to the lockers, we saw Leon standing in the doorway.

“Aren’t you supposed to be watching the scene?” asked Hina, pouting.
“Chill, ok? I propped the door open, I can see just fine,” said Leon, gesturing behind him with his thumb and approaching us. “By the way, didn’t mean to shout, call it a reflex, that’s the lifeguard voice talking. And you looked like you were about to step into some shady shit.”

“Relax, will you?” said Hina. She added, grumbling, “I wasn’t gonna do anything.”

He shot her a skeptical look. “Look, I know it’s you, and I know you got a hard-on for anything wet, but maybe have some chill and use your head?”

“You’re disgusting,” said Hina.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” said Leon. “Let’s not just jump into possible murder-water-stuff without knowing what’s in it?”

“You don’t know that pool was used,” said Hina.

“You could smell the chlorine off him from a mile away. No thanks. It’s not just my skin I’m trying to save.”

“I didn’t take you for the responsible type,” said another voice.

It was Celeste, stepping outside.

“Let’s just invite everyone out, why not,” I muttered under my breath. I just wanted to get back to the investigation.

To be fair, she’d made a valid observation. Leon did seem unusually on edge—way more cautious than the whole rogue-ish deal he tried to pull off.

“I’m trying to be the good guy here,” said Leon, to which Hina actually rolled her eyes. “Look at how murky it is!” he added, gesturing a hand to the water. “I mean, you’re asking me to jump in there? Who knows if the culprit fucked with the filter. Or the pH balance could be fucked, and that’s not even covering any wild card chemical bullshit they might have thrown in there just to fuck with the investigation. This is why I don’t fuck with pools.”

“It sounds kind of dangerous to me,” said Sayaka.

“Okay!” said Hina. “You’ve made your point.” She groaned, throwing her hands in the air. After a moment, she surveyed the room. “There’s a skimmer over there on the wall, I’m gonna try and fish out whatever that is at the bottom.”

“Why don’t we just drain it?” asked Junko.

Hina groaned. “That could take hours!” said Hina with a whine. “Just, let me get the net.”

“Might as well be doing something useful,” said Junko from a distance.

Amidst all the arguing, I hadn't even notice Junko slink off. "Hey guys! You're gonna wanna see this!"

She pointed to a cover in the floor. We hurried to her side, gathering around.

Lifting it up, we could see what looked like... some sort of broken machine and severed wires.

"That looks dangerous," said Sayaka.
"Agreed," said Junko. "Is this the pool filter?"

"Looks like it," said Leon.

"Pretty glad you didn't think with your gills now, did you Ariel?" said Junko to Hina.

She scowled. "Ok, fine. I'll go do something else."

"Let me know if something comes up," I said, already turning to head back. I paused at the door, noticing the scanner beside the handle and stopping to examine it briefly.

"Yo, what's up?" called Leon. "I left the door open!"

"No, I got that… it's just funny, you need an ID to enter from either side."

"Max precautions here, I guess," said Leon, approaching me. "Monokuma doesn't play any games."

"Sure," I said no longer really listening, and instead making a mental note on the ID system.

Back in the locker room, I took the time to approach Mondo. If he didn’t have anything on the crime itself, I was hoping he might at least have some info on the boy’s locker room. He seemed like the type to work out a lot.

He was leaning back against the wall, arms folded and head bowed, but he glanced up at me when he saw me approaching. "Hey, kid, you need somethin'?" he asked.

"Yeah, uh… just anything you might be able to give me about Makoto… uh, about the victim—would be helpful," I said with an anxious sigh, hugging my arms close to my chest. Victim. It felt weird to say it aloud. Plus, Mondo seemed relaxed in the moment, but that didn’t stop me from being intimidated by his domineering frame. He was much bigger and much taller than me. I didn’t want to say anything to set him off.

"Like?" he asked.

"I don’t know…" I pondered. "You spend a lot of time in here, right?"

"Uh, sure. What’s your point?"

He didn’t seem upset, but definitely on edge. Which could be suspicious; on the other hand, that was typical Mondo. He was just easily agitated. I took a step back, already shrinking under his gaze. Still, I continued. "Do you have any idea why Makoto would be in the locker room? Did you ever see him? Was he in here often?"

"Whoa, slow down there, girl. What’s with the interrogation? Look, If I’m bein’ for real, I hardly saw the guy. Taka may’ve asked him if he wanted to come along more than once, but the dude didn’t seem into it. Not his thing, ya know?"

I nodded. "I can believe it."

"S’Fine, I guess. ‘Though most people probably woulda bailed, anyway, so I get it. My work out’s kinda intense.‘"

"I can believe that, too," I said, unable to help but gaze at his hulking, impressive figure. I ignored the humblebrag.

He winced, and examining his face more closely, I noticed purplish bruising around his eye I
somehow missed.

“Is that a black eye?” I asked.

“Huh? Uh… yeah.” He scratched the back of his head with a sheepish smile, avoiding my gaze.

“Can I ask what happened?”

“I, uh… ran into a door frame.”

I gave him a look, but didn’t press him, not wanting to agitate him further.

I checked the clock. “Weird. Where has Chihiro gone?”

“I recommend you check the library.”

Hearing another voice, Mondo and I looked over to see Byakuya examining the mask. He looked up at us staring at him. “What? You certainly look like you could use the help. Besides, I think there’s something in there you might find of interest.”

I nodded, my smile coming out a tight-lipped grimace at best.

I thanked Mondo for his time, letting him to himself. Finally leaving the locker room, I headed to the library first. I could always come back, but I wanted to see if Byakuya was right about Chihiro. Maybe she had more information that could help with the case.

“Come with me to the library,” said Byakuya, as if he read my mind.

“Why?” I asked.

“You seem like you have a sensible head on your shoulders. You’re going to help me on my investigation.”

Apparently I was going to be his new sidekick. Still, I held my tongue and just nodded, mind still set on talking to Chihiro.

We walked over in silence. Chihiro was reading something when we walked into the room. She looked up upon hearing the door open and close.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Looking for you, actually,” I said. “You ran off without a word.”

“Oh!” There was a moment of recognition before she deflated once more. “No reason. I mean, it’s probably nothing…”

“Show her,” said Byakuya.

“What do you mean?” asked Chihiro.

“The file,” he said. “Tell her.”

“Listen, Chihiro,” I said, voice lowering. “I don’t want to push you, but if it’s important, I want to know. You seemed to know something about that mask.”

She took a deep breath. “Sun Witch Esper Ito.”
“Sorry?”

“Sun Witch Esper Ito. That mask is the character from the anime ‘Sun Witch Esper Ito’.”

I blinked.

“O...kay?”

“And it is the calling card for the serial killer Sparkling Justice.”

It was as if my heart stopped.

“For the what?”

“The serial killer.” She held up a file she’d been holding in her hands, opening it up for me to see the contents.

I took it from her. “Where did you get this?” I asked, flipping through the contents.

“In the archive,” said Chihiro. “There’s all sorts of confidential information in there. I mean, I have my resources, of course, but how the school gets their hands on it, I have no clue.”

“How’d you even know to look for something like this?” I asked.

She sighed, hugging her arms close to her body. “I have… a lot of spare time on my hands. I do a lot of light reading; old police reports, unsolved cases, stuff like that. I guess it could be considered a hobby of mine. I know, it’s a little strange.”

“It’s fine,” I said brusquely, perhaps a little more callous than intended. It was generally counterproductive (and besides the point just rude in general) to offend Chihiro, but I wanted to make sure I was furthering the investigation.

I glanced down at the file. “What is… Sparkling Justice?” I asked, squinting at the words on the page, trying to make sense of all this new information.

Byakuya spoke. “Sparkling Justice is a serial killer who is famous for only going after other criminals.”

She pointed to a section in the file:

*The gender of Sparkling Justice is unknown, but their calling card is mask of the main character of ‘Sun Witch Esper Ito’, a popular anime. In the show, Sun Witch Esper Ito is a magical girl and defender of justice, so it is possible that the killer is fashioning themself after the themes of the show. Sparkling Justice only targets other criminals. Often, their victims are revealed to have had a history of violent or abusive behavior. The true identity of the killer is unknown. Only one journalist has ever managed to host an interview with Sparkling Justice; however, as is the case for every person who comes into contact with Sparkling Justice, the reporter became their next victim. Judging by the frenetic patterns of the killer after each incident, they are suspected of having Dissociative Identity Disorder. Going by the time the incidents take place, the killer is likely a high school student.*

“This is their catchphrase,” said Chihiro. She took a deep breath, trying her best to project. “‘Justice complete! The center of justice that is pierced by justice! The lead star of justice that shines in the night sky! That would be me… Sparkling Justice!’” She frowned. “Sorry, I hope that helped.”

“Of course.”
If she was right about this, our situation could be even more dire than I anticipated. I tried to process all this new information.

“Do you see?” asked Byakuya.

“See?”

“What this has to do with the case, of course.”

“Well, of course,” I said. “The calling card is the same.”

“We could be dealing with a copycat,” said Chihiro. “Or…”

“Or… we consider the possibility that the real Sparkling Justice lives among us,” said Byakuya. He smirked. “I hope neither of you have reason for a guilty conscious.”

“D-Do you actually think it could be the real Sparkling Justice?” asked Chihiro.

“I’m not going to spell it out for you,” said Byakuya. “The clues are there, work it out for yourself.”

At hearing the door creak open, I whipped my head in the direction of the noise.

“Oh--Oh good, you’re here!” said Hina. She breathed a sigh of relief. “Mondo said you guys might be in the library, I’m glad I found you.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s Toko,” she said. “I went to check on her, and, well… she’s acting kind of strange.”

“Strange?” asked Byakuya sharply, his posture stiffening as if in sudden interest--uncharacteristic for someone like him. “In what way?”

She frowned, waving him to come nearer. “Come see for yourself.”

He nodded. “Very well. I was heading downstairs regardless. Come, Mukuro,” he said to me before following Hina out the door.

I grumbled something incoherent, feeling a bit like a dog on a leash. “You’ll be good, Chihiro?”

“Huh?” she asked. “Oh! Yeah, I guess so.”

I nodded, thanking her once more for her help before following the other two downstairs. Even though I was annoyed about being towed around like a showpony, I did have reason to head downstairs. I didn’t want to say anything to Byakuya, but really I wanted to check Makoto’s room for clues, just in case.

Just the thought felt invasive, but the thought of Makoto’s killer going free made me sick to my stomach. Makoto deserved justice, so I hoped if he were here, he would forgive me.

Once in the dorm hallway, I spotted Taka waiting outside Toko’s door.

“How is she?” asked Hina.

“Ah, Hina! You have returned! As you can see, she is still refusing to come out!” said Taka.

“So not good,” said Hina. She explained to the two of us. “She’s been saying some weird stuff.
Refusing to come out. Byakuya, I know you two are... complicated or whatever, but can you please talk to her?”

Byakuya sighed. “We are not together. But fine. This means nothing.”

He knocked on the door.

The door swung open, slowly and silently. A sliver of Toko’s face peaked through the crack.

I could barely make out her figure, but from what I could tell, she was shivering, sweating profusely and glowering at us from the other side of the door.

Whoa.

An aura of negativity flowed out from behind the door, forcing a gasp out of me.

“H-Hello?” asked Toko. Spotting us outside the door, she spat out, “W-What do you want?”

“Hello, Toko,” I said. “We were wondering if we could have a word with you?”

She stared at me in silence for a few long seconds. “C-Can’t,” she said. “I won’t let her get control.”

“Who?” I asked.

She ignored me. “I swear I’ll d-drive out that--that m-murderous fiend!”

“Toko,” said Byakuya, finally speaking.

Toko gasped. “Backula!”

He sighed again. “It’s Byakuya. Hina is asking for you to come out of your room.”

“I… I c-c-cant! I sorry, Byakuya. I p-promised. I-I-I’m sorry I couldn’t--couldn’t keep our--couldn’t keep our promise.”

With a loud slam, she shut the door in his face.

“Well, that was utterly pointless,” said Byakuya.

Promise?

What was that about? And why did Byakuya seem completely unmoved?

He frowned. “I have somewhere else to be.”

Curiosity getting the better of me, I followed him along. While his company wasn’t the most pleasant, his behavior has caught my interest.

He walked in silence, but upon realizing I was still with him, he scoffed—but not bothering to slow his pace. “Why are you still here?” he asked.

“Where is this place you have to be?” I asked.

“I just have a hunch,” he said. “Normally this is where our little team-up will end, but since you’ve been a relative help, I suppose I can show you what I mean.”
“How generous,” I said dryly.

He led me to the entrance hall, where near the wall sat a small box I’d never noticed. Reaching my hand in the box, I pulled out what looked like an e-handbook.

“Is that it?” he asked.

I frowned. “Yeah, why?”

“This is where the e-handbooks are kept, for well… the students who are no longer with us.”

“But there’s only one.”

He smirked. “That is interesting, isn’t it?”

“I guess. It doesn’t make any sense. Makoto… Makoto’s was on his person,” I said. It was still hard to speak of it. “Which means there should be two in the box—one for Hifumi and one for Sakura.”

“Well, which one is it?” he asked.

I tried to turn it on, pressing the button. I waited patiently for a moment. When nothing happened, I tried again. Again, nothing. “It’s not working,” I said. “It must be broken.”

“But according to Monokuma, the e-handbook is indestructible,” said Byakuya.

“Well, that’s obviously not the case.” I said.

“You’re right. They’re waterproof and can withstand pressure up to one ton. However, he also mentioned they have one weakness. But that’s it.”

But why would Sakura or Hifumi break their handbook? My head was swimming with questions. “So we have no way of knowing who owned this e-handbook?”

He shrugged. “Possibly through process of elimination. If we can find the missing handbook.”

He turned to leave.

“Hey! Are you going somewhere?” I called after him.

Byakuya paused in the doorway. “It’s unimportant. I think that’s all we have to offer one another. Good luck at the trial.” And with that, he left.

For the first time all morning, I was truly on my own.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, plot twist! Bet you guys didn't see that coming. I guess Makoto was the Sayaka of talentswap.

Also, if you're reading this I'm willing to bet you finished the game, so the Toko plot twist was really not going to be a surprise for anyone.

I hope this doesn't come across poorly, but I've spent so much time worrying about
making everything super accurate and tonally similar to the game, and it was just kind of sucking the joy out of everything. So, well... I've come to the realization that this is my fic... so lowkey I can do what I want.

And I've made some changes from the source material, which are to be expected with fic I guess. I'll be sure to explain soon. But yeah, it's nice to realize I just want to write what makes me happy, so Obviously Closet Case Hina, bi-icon Leon, Dad Friend Hiro may not be entirely accurate but its all a part of my *artistic vision*. That's a lie, I'm just messing around with characters.

Now that I swear I'm done being a jerk, please let me know what you think! Who is the culprit this time??
Chapter 2.5: The Tiniest Lifeboat

Chapter Summary

Time for the trial!!!!!!!

Chapter Notes

Is it hasty of me to post this without doing a final edit? Absolutely. Has it been several months since the last update? Yep. Guess what's happening.

Trigger warning for the usual execution stylized violence, but also for mentions of suicide. Content warnings also just b/c there is a lot more discussion abt mental illness and disorders than what I can remember from the text.

This is my longest chapter to date rip me. Also, I'm a cheater who made some minor tweaks to chapter 2.4. Of course you can reread if you like, but they're pretty minor. I tried to make it so it wouldn't be confusing.

shoutout to 100k!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So we were doing this again. This merry-go-round of disaster after disaster, faced with nothing but misery as we all took our places in our designated circle.

I was in Makoto's room when the time was up. I'd searched as much as I could. I'd done everything I could.

Oh, Makoto… We're going to figure out who did this to you. We will find justice.

It was time again for a deadly class trial.

As expected, when we entered Monokuma was already waiting for us.

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath.

"Don't. Say. A word," I said to Monokuma. In that moment, I hated everything about him. I was not in the mood for games. I glared at him with all the vitriol I could muster. "Crack a single joke and—"

"You'll what? Tear out my stuffing?" His grin did not even falter. "Set off the alarm in my system? Face it, hon, you have nothing."

I grit my teeth, knuckles white against my skin as I clenched my fists tight at my sides. Still, I said nothing. He was right. There was nothing with which to threaten him. I was powerless.

I took a deep breath, trying my best to ignore him. "Please," I said, now addressing the group. "Whoever did this, at least think of turning yourself in. For… For the sake of Makoto. He believed in
everyone here."

Silence.

Monokuma laughed. "Nyohoho! I think you'll have to try a little harder than that!" He cackled. "Puhuhuhuhuhuhuh! Well, since it looks like we're all ready, why don't we just go ahead and get started with the murder weapon? Ready? Set? Go!"

I took a deep, shuddering breath, eyes glued to the floor. "I hate this."

"Well, join the club," muttered Leon.

Nevertheless, we continued on with our torture. We had no other choice.

"Okay, I'll go first," said Junko. She sounded surprisingly wary, not her usual confident self. It was like the impact of Makoto's death hung over us all. Junko sighed. "Why do I feel like this is a trick question? I thought there was no decisive murder weapon."

"What?" asked Chihiro.

Junko sighed another deep sigh. "Oh, Cheerio, keep up. I thought it was obvious."

"I-I…" Chihiro bowed her head, perhaps in shame. "I'm afraid I didn't have much time to investigate. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," I said, with a small sigh. I was just not in the right frame of mind to pacify her—not when we were under this amount of pressure. "From what I can tell, Junko's sort of right. Sort of."

Junko grimaced, face screwed up like she had a bitter taste in her mouth. "Couldn't just let me have that one, could ya?"

"Guess not," I said, too fed up to care how it came across to her.

We were glaring at each other when Celeste cut in.

"Well," said Celeste, "by all means, speak your mind. You can't say something like that and then refuse to explain."

"Um… sure," I said, suddenly feeling the intensity of the crowd's gaze on me. "I just… this whole thing has just been very unclear." I frowned. It was like my brain was in a haze, the ability to think clearly clouded, impaired. I didn't have time for this! I didn't have the time, the energy, the willpower. Nevertheless, I had to continue. "The file said there aren't any major external injuries, and it checks out. I will say there was no murder weapon found at the scene of the crime. That seems to be certain."

"So… we're right back to where we started," said Leon.

Junko scowled. "Well, if you have anything to add to the discussion then by all means!"

"I wasn't—"

"Not to cut in on your little chit-chat," said Celeste, either intentionally misjudging the tone of the argument or blissfully ignorant. "Does anybody else find it rather odd?"

"Which part?" I asked.
"No murder weapon," said Celeste. "Forgive my amateur opinion, but has anyone else considered an... alternate possibility?"

We waited for her to elaborate.

"Of?" asked Junko, impatience getting the better of her.

"Suicide," said Celeste.

Silence.

She'd been so straightforward. So abrupt. Nobody knew what to say, certainly not me.

"Makoto wouldn't do that!" said Hina.

"Do you really believe that?" asked Byakuya.

"I do!"

"I..." Sayaka's lip began to tremble.

"S-Sayaka?" asked Chihiro. "Are you alright?"

Sayaka began to cry again. "I... I don't want to believe it any more that you do. I—I know was all thought Makoto was nice, and he w-was kind. And... And... we buh—believed someone s-so good c-could never—but... I knew Makoto. He—He was scared, and stressed, like all of us. M-Maybe he —"

"The kind of person who channels their negative emotions inward instead of outward," mused Koyko. "I see."

"But... Makoto is a happy person!" said Taka. "A good person! What reason would he have to do something like this?"

"G-God, you idiot!" said Toko. "Y-You j-j-just don't g-get it, do you? D-D-Do you h-have any—any idea how—any idea how depression and anxiety f-f-f-f-fucking—fucking works?"

For a moment, Taka didn't reply, just stood there in silence, dumbfounded.

"Are you asking me if I—"

"Easy there Brainiac," said Mondo, his voice a warning, surprisingly under control. Maybe it was his rules—the fact that he couldn't hit a woman. Maybe it was Taka being with him. "I think it's best if you stop yelling."

"I'm not yelling!" said Toko, absolutely yelling. "Y-You stop yelling!"

"That's right," said Junko, oddly taking Toko's side on all of this and ganging up on the bromance. "Let Scholarship hide behind a big strong man to take care of him, like he always does. Even if you are a meathead, Mondo, at least you got in with an actual talent. You're not just some pity case."

"Stop fighting, everyone!" said Sayaka. "This is exactly why Makoto died! Because we could never come together, and he felt like he had failed. He... He must have felt so alone."

"Well, we'll know that for certain by the end of this trial. At the moment, we can't know anything for sure," said Byakuya, forever the skeptic. "Can we?"
"I'm just looking out for the group's best interests," said Celeste—which I didn't buy for a minute, despite the fact that she did sound sound sincere. Heavy emphasis on "sound". "In a place like this, suicide also counts as a murder. I quite like my life. My priority is to make sure the vote is accurate," said Celeste.

I considered it. "It... is a possibility, but I don't want to come to any conclusions." While I hadn't it ruled out, it certainly wasn't the only explanation.

I wanted to figure out who was with him around the time of his death. That was my hunch, and from there, I hoped we would be able to truly determine whether this case was suicide.

"Besides," I added, "I think someone else was with him around the time of death. We just need to figure out if that's the culprit."

"Why do you say that?" asked Celeste, sounding genuinely intrigued for once in her guarded life.

"Broken ribs."

Several of the others exchanged perplexed looks.

"Fuck," said Mondo. "You could tell that from examining the body?"

I nodded, not sure whether to take his expression as impressed or uneasy.

"Okay..." began Junko warily, "But what does that mean?"

Leon held up a hand. "Hang on, you said broken ribs?" he asked, looking intently at me.

I nodded, unsure where he was heading with this. "Yeah, wh—"

He looked to the group, explaining. "CPR. Even when done right, you can still break ribs." He turned back to me again. "You think it could be 'cause of CPR?"

"If the cause of death was asphyxiation, then, well... yes. I thought it might be the heimlich," I said. "But there's no bruising on his back, so you're probably right. Whoever did this was probably not trying to save him while he was choking. More likely they were trying to revive..." I took a deep breath. It was hard to think about, let alone say "Revive someone already unconscious."

*So by that point it must've already been too late.*

"Which would mean that whoever tried to revive Makoto... must have gotten to him after he already drowned," said Sayaka, as if she knew what I was thinking.

"They must have gotten to him too late," said Hina.

"Leon, how do you know this kind of stuff?" asked Hiro, looking at Leon with a look that was awfully suspicious.

The others also exchanged equally suspicious glances, but I wasn't at that level just yet. He was a swimmer, and from what I could tell it was all basic stuff, general healthcare training for service providers.

"Lifeguarding," said Leon, muttering under his breath. At seeing everyone's dubious expressions, he added. "Hey, look, sometimes I pay attention."

"Doubt it," grumbled Hina.
He ignored her. "Those shitty First-Aid cert classes had to pay off someday."

"Probably didn't expect it to be here, but sure," said Junko under her breath.

"But if what you guys are saying is correct…" said Taka. "That doesn't make any sense. Because that means the killer was trying to save Makoto…" He looked to the rest of us. "Why would they do something like that?"

"Nah, bro," said Mondo almost immediately. It was almost like they were in-sync—hooked up to the same wavelength. "Whoever broke his ribs, or was tryna save him, or—or whatever the fuck—it coulda been someone else. Didn't hafta be the killer."

"Oh, right! Mondo, that is a very smart observation!" For a moment, Taka had a look of almost smitten admiration before probably realizing his present company.

I tried not to feel envious. With Junko angry at me and Makoto gone, I felt more alone than ever. They… They certainly had each other.

"So how about this?" said Leon. "Makoto… committed suicide by drowning himself. Someone found the body. And tried to resuscitate him."

"Drowning?" asked Hiro.

"How would we even begin to determine that?" asked Junko.

"You need a reason to be resuscitated," said Leon. "That seems like the most clear reason."

"That… that's brilliant, Leon!" said Sayaka.

He flushed a deep shade of red. "It's nothing…"

Taka's expression shifted, looking mystified, morose again. "But… someone else who found the body before the rest of us and doesn't want to say?"

Junko rolled her eyes. "Well, of course they don't want to say, genius!" she said. "Obviously admitting to being present at the scene of the crime would implicate them! Hell, even an innocent person wouldn't want that."

"Can we talk about something for a sec?" asked Hina.

"Uh…" I said.

"Can we go back to the cause of death? What was it again?"

"Asphyxiation," said Byakuya. "There's more in the file if you need to take a look."

"Oh!" said Hina, thrown by his surprising cooperation. "Um… thank you?"

He shrugged. "I mean, since someone obviously didn't do their homework."

"Oh, lay the fuck off," said Leon. "She was nice enough to help Toko back to her room. It's not her fault Toko had a meltdown."

"You didn't have to say it like that," said Hina. "Toko—"

"W-What are you talking about?" asked Toko. "B-Back off. I don't n-n-need your help."
"Uh, let's call it what it is," said Leon. "A meltdown. You seriously don't remember? You were
acting pretty cuckoo."

"Sh-Sh-Shhhh-Shut up! It w-was n—It was nothing!" She was shrill, insistent. To a suspicious
degree, yes, but I still felt a pang of sympathy for her.

"Back on point," said Byakuya. "You wanted to ask about the cause of death?"

"Um... yeah..." said Hina. "Something about that. I just..."

"Well, out with it," said Byakuya.

"I don't think Leon is right if the file states that Makoto died of asphyxiation," said Hina.

"Right about which part?" asked Kyoko.

"Both," said Hina. "Drowning and the suicide."

Kyoko spoke, catching my attention. "Mukuro, can you tell us what form of asphyxiation?"

"Sorry?" I asked.

I was always surprised when Kyoko decided to speak. She spent so long being a quiet observer.
However, whenever she did choose her words, she was always so precise, so intent. She spoke with
purpose. It was hard to miss.

"In what manner did he die?"

I didn't have the answer she wanted. I might've been able to give her something, but I had been
cought off guard. "I—um—"

"Maybe he choked on something!" offered Taka.

"Coulda been strangled," said Mondo.

No. It wasn't either of those.

"Um..." I said, trying to recollect my memory of Makoto's body. "Well, there's no sign of trauma to
the neck, so I don't think he was strangled, but—"

"Hang on!" said Hina, loud and clear and causing several heads to turn in her direction. "Now I
remember!" She looked to me, expression triumphant. "What if he drowned? Would that count?"

"B-But the file says asphyxiation," said Sayaka. Her voice was small. "I don't think Monokuma
would lie."

"True," said Celeste with a sigh. "What purpose would lying even gain?"

"To mess with us!" said Hiro. "Come on, that bear has been up to something since day one!"

"Understatement of the century," said Junko.

"Any thoughts on that?" asked Leon to the old bear.

"Yours truly? A liar?" said Monokuma, trying to sound aghast but sounding more disingenuous than
ever. "Ridiculous! Put the thought from your mind!"
"Why should we trust anything you say?" asked Kyoko. "If you really are being honest, what is to stop you from doing what you want? Why not just lie to us this whole time? Certainly you'd get your desired results much faster."

"Nonsense!" said Monokuma. "Nobody will subscribe to our channel if we don't adhere to some sort of structure! As all content creators say, consistency is key!"

"Is it a lie, though?" asked Leon.

"What do you mean?" asked Hina. Her expression was wary.

Byakuya sighed. "Hina… might have a point."

It took her about a second to pick up on his tone, but when she did, she was not happy. "Hey!" said Hina, ponytail standing on end, looking about ready to deck him. "Don't act so surprised!"

"Whatever," said Leon. "What I'm saying is that considering Monokuma's, uh, flexibility with the rules, ya know? It might not be a lie after all!"

"It requires a bit of an imaginative stretch, but it could work under a certain logic," said Byakuya. "Isn't that right, Mukuro?"

"I mean, I don't make the rules," I said. "However Monokuma wants to phrase it, we're at his mercy…"

I shuddered at the thought.

"Hmmm…" Kyoko looked deep in thought. "If you think about it, drowning could count as form of suffocation."

Monokuma waved his paw dismissively. "Ok! So I stretched the truth a little! You little junior detectives certainly figured it out anyway, so no harm no foul!"

"And," said Leon excitedly, "that explains why Monokuma would lie! To throw us off the scent. It'd make much more sense to conclude suicide from a drowning than from asphyxiation!"

"That is…" said Sayaka. "Wow, when you think about it that way, it makes so much sense." She was a little starry eyed.

"Thanks, I—"

I felt sick to my stomach.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one with that sentiment because Junko grumbled, "Oh, gimme a break. I'm gonna hurl."

Sayaka was sheepish. "Sorry."

"So, I was right!" said Leon. He grew somber. "I… I was right. Makoto drowned."

"Drowning," whispered Hina in awe. "That is… that is horrible!"

Leon nodded, expression screwed up like he was in pain. "You die from oxygen deprivation… as the water fills your lungs," said Leon.

He didn't look at any of us. Eyes blank. Somber. Voice small.
"It's not like the movies. They don't call for help. They don't get the chance to. An active drowner will struggle at the surface, but if you're not careful, you're not observant, you can miss it. Because the only thing a drowning victim cares about is reaching that surface. They don't care about calling for help. They don't care about anyone else they might drag with them. It's like air is the only thing in their world that matters... and it's always just out of reach."

He was more morose than I'd probably ever seen him.

Leon looked up, probably in that moment realizing that he'd gained a captive audience. "Sorry," he said. "It's dark, I know."

"No," said Sayaka. "It—it's a good thing you have knowledge on this subject. You've been very helpful."

Their eyes met.

"It's no prob," said Hiro, not even realizing the moment that was passing between them. "I mean, that's all well and good, yeah, but aren't we missing the most obvious clue?" he asked. When he only got blank stares, he continued. "If Makoto drowned, he should've been wet, yeah?"

"No shit, genius," said Junko. "That's how it works. In other breaking news: water is wet."

"Water is sticky, not wet!" said Taka. "Technically, water is an adhesive—" he continued but Junko cut him off before he could even finish.

"Ugh!" Junko held up a hand. "You are killing me here, Scholarship. She groaned, rubbing circles at her temples.

"No, no. Hiro might have something here. We can start with the basics and work our way up," I said. "Hiro, what is your premise?"

He frowned. "I... don't know?"

"How about this," I said. "'If Makoto drowned, he should've been wet.' Right?"

"Uh... Yeah, guess so."

"But Makoto was dry, so he couldn't have drowned. Is that your point?"

"No, I wouldn't say that..." said Hiro.

I nodded. "Lack of evidence is not proof, right?" I paused. "So then, is there any other proof that we can use? Anything at all?"

"Is there evidence that indicates he was in the pool at any point?" asked Byakuya. "I believe that what you were going for."

I sighed. "Yes."

"Hiro, I believe you were present during the conversation," said Byakuya. "I'd hope your memory span is longer than that of a goldfish."

I spoke, too, hoping to jog his memory. "Come on," I said.

When it was taking him a bit to come up with a response, Junko cut in. "Why not just tell us the answer?" she said, with a dramatic pout.
I shook my head ever so slightly. "That's not how this works." People needed to come to their own conclusions. I would believe that to the end.

"You were complaining…" I prompted him, continuing to fix my gaze intently on him.

"Um…" He scratched his head. "Oh, right! The chlorine, yeah? Yeah, I definitely remember that conversation now."

There it is.

Dire situation aside, I did feel just the smallest moment of pride.

Kyoko nodded. "You're referring to the smell. This must've happened…" she began. Even she looked like she was having trouble getting the words out. "Well, it must've happened last night. No water, no time to rinse off… So, the smell."

"Oooohhhh!" said Hiro, eyes wide. "I get it now!"

Hina just shook her head. "I thought that was your point."

"Uh… Sure," he said, with an unconvincing laugh. "Yeah, totally."

"Hang on," said Leon. "I just realized something is kinda fucked. If Makoto drowned, his clothes would be wet."

"Hiro was literally just asking about that!" said Hina.

"You already know the answer. At least you should. Why don't you tell us?" said Byakuya.

"Tell them, Leon. 'Oh my god," snickered Junko. "You're his new Makoto."

"I don't know what you're talking about," says Leon.

"Pretty, dumb, useless, easy to boss around?" said Junko "I think you fit the bill."

"Well that depends," said Byakuya, and I was surprised that he didn't deny it.

"On?" asked Junko.

"On whether he can put together the answer," said Byakuya. "Come on, we don't have all day."

"Oh, fuck off already," said Leon.

"D-D-Don't you dare—" began Toko, but Leon cut her off.

"No. I am done being talked down to, it is my turn to talk. It's a legit question. Hiro was wondering—if he drowned, why wasn't he wet? Well, if he did drown, tell me, why are his clothes dry?"

"Because they aren't his," said Byakuya. "That's about as obvious as you get. And here I thought that would have been the easy part to put together."

"So he's wearing someone else's clothes?" asked Hiro.

Junko nodded. "Now that I think about it… Bazinga might be right. Makoto almost always wears his uniform! When has Makoto ever worn a track suit?"

Kyoko shook her head, still looking pensive. "I don't recall him owning one."
"Huh," said Junko, giving Kyoko a weird look. "And you would know this, how?"

Kyoko shrugged.

"I buy it," said Mondo. "The kid didn't exactly work out."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Sayaka. "That someone bothered to change his clothes? But..."
She looked disturbed. "Who would do something like that?"

"The culprit, surely," said Byakuya.

"But I thought we'd ruled this a suicide?" asked Hina.

"It's only one possibility," said Kyoko. "But I think the fact that someone bothered to dress him is definitely suspicious."

"Plus, he was discovered in the boys locker room," said Celeste. "Perhaps the culprit wished to disguise their method of murder. That would certainly give them motive to swap the clothing."

"Hang on." Hiro held up a hand. "I thought you believed he committed suicide?" he asked, looking to Celeste.

"Is it so wrong for me to adapt my beliefs to the evidence?" asked Celeste, voice innocent enough even as her expression was severe.

"Ok, fine," said Hiro, backing off under her intense gaze. "I just... So, wait... I'm not following. Is this person who changed his clothes the same person who broke Makoto's ribs, or is this a different person entirely?"

"Yeah, that is definitely strange," said Sayaka. "If it is the same person, why would someone try... try and save Makoto when..." She had to stop just then, too choked up to continue.

"I... I see..." said Chihiro, looking deep in thought. When she was occupied, she didn't seem to be quite so overwhelmed. For once, she had her head on right, instead of being overcome with sadness. "So the dilemma is whether we ought to treat the attempted savior and the attempted disguiser as one person or two different people!"

"Indeed, it is peculiar," said Celeste. "Why would someone bother to try and save Makoto if they were just going to cover it up?"

"Well, it..." said Taka, struggling to come up with anything. "It has to be two different people, then! Right?"

"It makes sense to me," said Mondo.

"Or, the killer could have been remorseful," said Kyoko. When she received nothing but odd looks, she simply added with a shrug, "It's a possibility."

"Ugh, check it out," said Junko with a scoff. "The mercenary is going to give us a lecture about trying to save people. Anybody else feeling the irony?"

"Junko, relax. I don't know whether we have enough to draw any conclusions just yet," I said.

"Besides, hasn't this all just been based on the idea that Makoto drowned?" asked Chihiro. "What if we're just... you know. Wrong? We're basing everything on just assumptions."
"But what about the pool deck?" asked Hina. "I definitely remember stepping in water when we checked it."

"Same," I said.

"Then it must've been in recent use, right?" said Junko. "The pool deck would not have had time to dry, and I, uh, doubt anyone would be going for a swim in these circumstances."

"That checks out," I said.

"Plus… we found something at the bottom of the pool," mumbled Hina, voice noticeably lower as she avoided everyone's eyes.

"You what?" asked Chihiro.

"There was definitely something there," said Hina, posture upright and defensive. "I—I don't know what it was. The water was murky, I couldn't see!" She sounded deflated, disappointed in herself, ponytail wilting.

"But the bigger question: if it's not a suicide, how do you drown someone else?" asked Hiro.

"It's pretty easy, actually," said Leon. "It happens. Not intentionally, but active victims will sometimes submerge other people in their attempt to reach the surface. They just… they latch on, and they don't let go. That's why you gotta be careful."

"Yeah, but, it sounds like ya gotta be pretty strong to do that, right?" asked Mondo.

"Actually, no. That's why it's so dangerous. In theory, someone really small could even drown someone much larger if they refuse to let go for long enough." Leon shook his head. "Fuck, I sound like my instructor right now. Kill me."

"But… What do you do if they don't let go?" asked Chihiro.

"The last thing you want is two victims instead of one, so if they're already latched on… you just do whatever you can to get them off you," said Leon.

"Even if it hurts them?" asks Chihiro.

"Look," says Leon, looking as if he were struggling to find the words. "We have training so that doesn't happen. But I mean. If you really had to, then… yeah, I guess so. Bruises will heal. Going passive is much more dangerous."

"Passive?" asked Chihiro.

"Going unconscious," said Kyoko.

"So the drowning victim might sustain injuries… I thought.

That sounds particularly likely if the "rescuer" was untrained. What was the likelihood of them panicking and doing whatever they could to get the victim off?

But… Makoto sustained very few injuries. I didn't detect any bruises during my examination.

Then again. Maybe Makoto wasn't being rescued. In fact, it was probably the opposite. Maybe he was being intentionally drowned. Would the same logic apply? It seemed like it.
A drowning victim would struggle to escape a culprit's grasp, doing whatever they could to escape, right?

Maybe we shouldn't be looking for injuries on the victim. Instead, we should be keeping an eye out for injuries on the culprit.

Junko gave Leon another mystified look. "How can you say shit like this, and be mad when we immediately think you're sus?"

"Because I'm telling you, instead of keeping it to myself," said Leon.

"Look, whatever, the kid reeks like chlorine, I think it's a safe bet that he drowned," said Junko.

"But was he murdered, or did he kill himself?" asked Celeste. "That, I believe, is the real question."

"Well, someone clearly tampered with the pool filter," said Junko. "We saw out there on the deck. Someone cut the wires."

"And someone changed his clothes," said Mondo.

"But someone also performed CPR on him," said Sayaka. "That sounds much more like an attempted savior to me than an attempted killer."

"Oh, we're just talking in circles!" said Hina.

"Why don't we just..." I racked my brains. "Focus on something tangible instead?"

"Like?" asked Junko.

"How about... the track suit?" I asked.

"Yes, an excellent suggestion!" said Taka. "If the track suit does not belong to Makoto, then perhaps our focus should be intent on finding the owner!"

"But why would we assume the track suit doesn't belong to Makoto?" asked Leon. "Dress the kid in his own clothes, nobody would bat an eye. Isn't that the best way to throw someone off their game?"

"Come on," said Junko. "Fashion sense aside, I assume you have to know something about clothes, you wannabe punk. If you'd taken a closer look, you would've realized."

"Realized what?"

"The clothes don't fit."

"People wear clothes in the wrong size all the time."

"Yeah, but track suits are for working out," said Junko. "When given the ability to choose your own clothes, why would anyone pick a tracksuit that large? You can't even run in the damn thing. The one he's wearing is clearly made for someone a good deal taller."

"So we pin the track suit to the owner, and we have what we're looking for?" asked Sayaka.

"At the very least we have a suspect," said Mukuro.

"Nonono," said Leon. "That doesn't make sense. If we're gonna act like there's a culprit, they don't have to use their own tracksuit. You said so yourself. All they have to do is find one."
"They could have grabbed one from the storage room," said Hina. "They've got all kinds of stuff in there!"

"I suppose," said Celeste. "However, would the culprit want to risk being spotted out in the middle of the night? I was in the storage room. I didn't see anybody come in."

"So… it has to be one already owned. I guess that means… Process of elimination?" asked Hina.


"Mine is also in black!" said Taka. "Size large. My locker is on the bottom row, second to the left. I always make sure to lock mine, so everything should still be inside!"

"Awww, you guys are matchers!" cooed Junko, but her tone was antagonizing. "How fucking sweet."

"Heh, you guys are workout buddies, then, huh?" asked Hiro. "Ain't that a bromance nobody expected." He sighed. "I haven't even touched my tracksuit," he added, rather sheepishly. "It's an XL in white, but it's still in my dorm closet."

"The suit on Makoto is a men's medium," I said.

Hina counted them off on her finger. Or at least, she tried to count them off. "So… that leaves… who again?"

"If this is all correct, then it leaves Leon, Makoto, and Byakuya," said Kyoko. "Assuming the track suit was found in the boys locker room."

"So it's between Leon and Byakuya," said Junko. "Why am I not surprised?"

"What do you mean, not surprised?" asked Leon, indignant. "Byakuya, I can totally understand, but what the hell have I ever done?"

"Um, you're overly defensive about everything constantly," said Junko.

"Please. That's just how he is," said Byakuya.

"What do you know?" said Leon, glaring at him. "You don't even know me! You don't even bother to talk to any of your classmates, you antisocial douche."

"You are rather on edge," said Sayaka. "Are you sure there isn't anything you want to tell us? Anything at all?"

"No!" said Leon, but there was a near crazed look to his eye. "I'm on edge because you all are ganging up on me!"

"Leon—"

"Come on, Sayaka, you know me! I'm a terrible liar, you know that!"

"I— I don't know anymore," said Sayaka.

I remembered something. "Besides Makoto's handbook, I only found one other thing in the suit's jacket pocket. Something that clearly points to the track suit's owner, " I said, or more accurately, lied, reaching into my coat pocket and turning the pin over with my fingers, but not
bringing it out just yet.

I wanted to test something.

"Are you kidding? That doesn't prove anything! Everyone uses safety pins!" said Leon.

**There we go.**

"Hold on a second!" said Kyoko. "There's something wrong with that statement."

"I'm pretty sure the claim that most people at one point or another have used a safety pin is not controversial," said Junko.

"No, no, not that," said Kyoko. "Mukuro… you never said what the item you found on Makoto's person actually was… did you?"

Unable to help myself, my lip twitched in a small, triumphant smirk. "I did not."

Leon's face went white.

"You didn't say… Huh." Kyoko nodded to herself, perhaps in realization. Perhaps it was my imagination, but Kyoko's eyes seemed to be smiling with me. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Her tone was impressed.

"Yes, I did."

Our eyes met, and she seemed to nod in response. A moment passed between us. For once this trial, I didn't hate myself and everyone else in this cursed room. I was proud of my work.

"And can you show or tell us what exactly that item was, Mukuro?" she asked.

"I can do both," I responded, perhaps a little too chipper for my own good. "As as matter of fact, it was a safety pin." I pulled it out of my pocket, holding it up to the light for the others to see.

"Funny coincidence, don't you think?"

"Very strange, yes," said Kyoko. "Unless perhaps the owner of the tracksuit happened to remember an item he'd kept in one of the pockets."

"It… It was just a lucky guess!" said Leon.

Junko scoffed. "Yeah, right. You really expect us to believe that bullshit?"

"It appears you've dug your own grave," I said.

Byakuya chuckled. "Yes, but you handed him the shovel, didn't you? Pretty good, Mukuro. I will give you that. Seriously, 'something that clearly points to the tract suit's owner'? What a bunch of nonsense."

Hiro gasped. "So it was a bluff! Well, pardon my fucking French but that is frickin' cool."

For a moment, Leon said nothing.

Then finally…

"Ok." He sighed. "Ok, fine. The suit belongs to me. I keep it in one of the lockers. One of the safety pins broke on my coat like two days ago, and I remember leaving it in one of the pockets because I
forgot about it. I only happened to realize it was still there when it jabbed me. But that's it! I swear I
didn't kill him!"

"And now it's all starting to make sense," said Junko. "I mean, you're the only one here with that
tacky D.I.Y. look."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize this was a makeover reality tv show," said Leon. "Last time I checked, we
were trying to solve a murder, not stage an intervention for my poor fashion choices. So maybe lay.
The fuck. Off."

Sayaka looked once again on the verge of tears, absolute betrayal and heartbreak in her voice.
"Leon…"

At hearing her voice, he stopped glaring at Junko and turned to face her. His rage melted away in an
instant, replaced by a helpless expression. Seeing her like this dropped every defense.

"Sayaka… I—"

"Leon, I—I want to believe you, but. I. I can't. Not anymore. If you've lied about this, who knows
what else you could be hiding?"

I knew she was hurting, but… Maybe she did have a point. Maybe he really wasn't trustworthy.

"Sorry to cut in, but I think Leon has a point… I don't think it would make sense for the culprit to use
their own tracksuit," said Chihiro. "Because… I… I—"

"Thank you!" said Leon. He paused, doing a double-take. "Wait, you believe me?"

"I… Forget it," said Chihiro. "I don't know if I should say. It's just going to throw off all our progress
so far."

"Oh, enough with the suspense, just tell us already!" said Junko.

"I, um… I don't know if the culprit is Leon. However, I do think the culprit is Sparkling Justice."

"Yeah!" said Leon. "Uh… who is Sparkling Justice?"

"A serial killer," said Byakuya plainly.

"Well, that totally explains everything, and totally isn't ominous as shit at all," said Junko.

"Uh, yeah," said Leon. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, I am not a serial killer."

"Maybe so," said Byakuya, "But I believe somebody in this room is."

"That's where I was this whole time," said Chihiro, voice small. "In the library, trying to find the
folder on Sparkling Justice."

"Hang on, I feel like like I'm a few steps behind," said Junko. "Why on Earth would you think the
killer is Sparkling Justice?"

Toko squeaked. "I-It—It's nothing!" she said. "Noth-thing a-at all!"

Byakuya ignored her. "Mukuro," he said, looking away from her and to me. "Care to answer the
question?"
"Oh," I said. "Um…" I racked my brain. "Sparkling Justice has a calling card, yes?"

"Which is?"

"A mask?"

Byakuya raised an eyebrow. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

Junko rolled her eyes. "Jesus, are you her dad?"

I ignored Junko. "No, I—" I scowled. "The mask. It's the same as the one found at the crime scene. It's the mask of a character from a popular anime… What was it? Sun Witch…?"

Toko gasped, eyes going wide as she clasped her hands together. "Sun Witch Esper Ito?"

"Yes!" said Chihiro. "Have you heard of it?"

"I. Love. That. Show." Toko's eyes lit up, practically jumping up and down with excitement. Her body language was completely different, not longer closed in on herself, there was an energy I had never seen from her. She was like a completely different person. Even the stutter seemed to diminish. "Sun Witch Esper Ito is my life. She is s-such an inspiration. There is s-so m-much I about that show I could talk about. O-One of the b-best magical girl shows I've ever seen!" She was practically giggling with delight.

"Interesting," said Byakuya. "Do you perhaps love the show enough to imitate the character. Or… Own a mask of her likeness?"

Upon hearing this, she clamped shut immediately, lips sealed. She stopped jumping around, standing almost stiffly still. "I—I d-don't know what you're t-t-talking about." She avoided everyone's eyes.

"I think you know exactly what I'm talking about," said Byakuya.

"The mask…" I muttered, putting it together. Louder, I spoke this time to the entire group. "There was a Sun Witch Esper Ito mask found at the crime scene."

"It's a popular show, Byakuya," said Hina, looking apprehensively between him and Toko. "I'm sure you can find a mask just like it in the gift shop. There's all sorts of stuff in there."

"This… seems a little extreme, Byakuya," said Celeste. "Are you actually accusing Toko of being a serial killer? I hardly think being a fan of a popular anime is grounds for that."

"True, but that's not all there is to it," said Byakuya. "There is a killer in our midst, and I intend to smoke them out." "Chihiro," said Junko. "I can't believe you're seriously buying into this."

"It… may be far fetched," said Chihiro.

"Look, I don't care if you doubt yourself, but I know that I am right," said Byakuya. "Which means so are you. Because there's another piece of evidence, and I think you know exactly what I mean."
"I—I wasn't there for the investigation," said Chihiro.

He sighed. "Do I really have to explain everything?"

"Look," said Hina, "Maybe I just don't get this, but I don't understand why any of this indicates Toko being an actual serial killer. Maybe whoever did this is just a really, really invested fan of their work."

"True," said Celeste. "We seem to have found ourselves a serial killer enthusiast." She looked to Byakuya and Chihiro. "Or several."

Chihiro looked down at her feet, saying nothing.

"People are allowed to have hobbies," I said.


Chihiro kept her head down. "Right…"

"Then again, what else is an absurdly rich person supposed to do in their spare time?" said Junko.

"Mukuro," said Byakuya. "What do Toko and Sparkling Justice have in common?"

I didn't answer despite the fact that... I did know what he was talking about. Starting to put it together, I could solve murders, reveal culprits, but this felt like… an invasion. A betrayal.

When I didn't answer, Byakuya scoffed, turning away from me. "Fine, then. Not you. Chihiro?"

"I—I don't know," whispered Chihiro.

"You saw the file, didn't you?" asked Byakuya.

"Yes, but—"

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. It was for the case. "Toko and Sparkling Justice both have DID."

"Sorry, what?" asked Hiro.

"DID," said Chihiro, finishing for me, perhaps finally getting her courage up. Her voice was very quiet. "Dissociative Identity Disorder." Once again, she was avoiding everyone's eyes. She shook her head ever so slightly, as if disappointed in herself.

"Ooooh!" said Hiro. "I know what you're talking about! That thing where people develop different personalities, yeah? Freaky shit, right there."

"Hiro!" said Hina, tone forceful. Her eyes were still on Toko. It was like a warning.

"According to the police reports on Sparkling Justice," said Chihiro, "based on their frenetic behavior after the killer commits each crime, they are thought to have Dissociative Identity Disorder."

"Ok, but what does that have to do with Toko?" asked Sayaka.

"You—You're not tryna say that Toko has this—this DID, are you?" asked Hiro.
"You tell me," said Byakuya. "How was she behaving this morning?"

Hiro gasped, practically leaping in his spot with excitement. "Ohhhh, how could I have missed this?"

Junko rolled her eyes, snapping with much more vitriol than even her usual sarcasm. "Because this isn't one of your paranormal activity investigations, alright? Disorders aren't there to satisfy your spooky thrills, dumbass." She shook her head. "This is ridiculous! If Toko had DID, she would just tell us. Ain't that right, girl?"

Toko just shook her head, eyes still wide. She muttered something indiscernible, visibly sweating bullets.

"Toko?" asked Junko.

"Come on, Byakuya!" said Hina. "Is this really necessary? Shouldn't we, I don't know, ask her first?"

"Oh, I get it!" said Hiro. "So when she was acting all weird this morning, that's why? She's a schizo."

"Don't say that!" said Hina.

"Also, that is not the same thing," mumbled Junko.

Hiro ignored them. "But I mean the the fainting, the mood change, the antisocial behavior... that explains so much." That was when his behavior changed from excited to terrified. "Holy shit!" he said with a gasp. "A serial killer in our midst!"

Leon spoke, ignoring Hiro—or at least that last part. "Yeah... Well, anyway, he's got a point. Toko, you were totally freaking out when you saw Makoto."

"As would anyone if they saw a dead body," reasoned Celeste.

"But this was different!" said Leon. "She said, 'they wouldn't'. Ya know. Dot, dot, dot. 'This can't be happening!' Who is 'they'?"

"The culprit," said Hina with a small frown. "Or Makoto. Right?"

"She was in shock," said Celeste. "It is an understandable reaction."

"Maybe," said Kyoko, "But after she passed out, her behavior waking back up was completely different. Her voice, her body language, even the way she carried herself. And her stutter was gone."

"Just because she was acting a little strange doesn't mean she must have turned into completely different person," said Junko.

"Yes, but," began Chihiro, "Toko has an aversion to blood. After she regained consciousness, she didn't seem to be bothered at all. Sometimes conditions are not shared between alters. For example, diabetes, blindness. In our case, sickness at the sight of blood. Or loss of a stutter. Plus, she became confused as the rest of us referred to her as 'Toko'. Suggesting they are separate entities who do not share memories."

"So then are you suggesting that blood is a trigger for her, um... other personalities?" asked Taka.

"Alters," I reminded them, my voice low. "They're called alters."
"Loss of consciousness seems to do it," said Kyko. "But if blood makes her faint, then yes. That appears to be a trigger. Perhaps the alter emerges at potential threat of danger."

"And the way this, um… 'alter' was speaking," said Chihiro. "She… or maybe they? I don't know the gender. They framed their appearance as a more appealing alternative to Toko."

"Can alters know of each other's existence?" asked Hina.

"They can," said Chihiro. "As far as I know. Usually they don't share memories, but sometimes they learn by other means. It can depend on how many alters they have, of course, some people have many. And just because you know of one's existence doesn't mean you'll know of all of them. I… I don't know many Toko has, but if she does have DID, I'm guessing we've now met two."

"Yes," said Celeste. "This all makes sense. However, I do see a problem."

"Which is?" asked Byakuya.

"Even if Toko has Dissociative Identity Disorder, that does not prove in any way that she killed Makoto."

"Oh, come on!" said Hiro. "A person gets killed by a masked vigilante who happens to have DID, and then it turns out one of our classmates has been hiding the fact that she has DID this whole time? How can you not come to that conclusion?"

"Even if Toko does have DID, having DID doesn't make her a murderer," I said, for once short on my patience with him. "That just makes her a person with a disorder."

I could put up with a lot of his crackpot theories out of fondness and amused curiosity, but Toko was a person, not some sort of mythical creature.

Byakuya shook his head. "What is with this foolish need to protect her? You're so busy crusading that you're willing to ignore the evidence in favor of your worldview."

"God," said Junko, groaning and shaking her head. "Man, shut the fuck up."

"What are you talking about?" I asked him.

"Hina?" asked Byakuya, turning to look at her.

"Don't look at me. I don't know anything!" said Hina, but I noticed the change in her body language. She hugged her arms close to her chest—defensive, stand-offish.

Nervous.

"You walked Toko back to her dorm room, yes?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, expression changing from defiance to apprehension, eyebrows knit together. "You knew that already."

"And when you went to get her to come out of her room, what did you do?"

"I…" She frowned. "I came to get you. I figured you might be able to talk to her… Since she actually listens to you. God knows why," she added with a grimace.

"And her response when I knocked on the door?" asked Byakuya.
Hina's frown deepened. "Fear," she said. "She refused to come out, no matter what we said to her."

"But she wasn't afraid of what was on the outside, was she?" asked Byakuya.

"What are you saying?" asked Hina.

I thought back to earlier.

"I w-won't let her get control. I swear I'll d-drive out that—m-m-mur—murderous fiend!"

"I won't let her get control!" mused Taka, voicing my thoughts out loud. "So... are you trying to say that she locked herself away... because she was not afraid of someone getting in. Rather, she was afraid of letting herself out?"

"Hang on," said Junko. "I get what you're going for, but Byakuya. It's essentially just her word against yours. Why should we believe you?"

Byakuya turned to look at Toko, who was trembling all over and white as a sheet. "Any thoughts on that, Toko?"

For a moment, she was silent. "You... You promised!" said Toko. "You promised not to— to tell anyone."

Chihiro gasped. "You mean it's true?" she asked, eyes wide. "I—I had a suspicion, but I never expected... I mean.. I didn't want to believe. Or say. Even if I was right, it wasn't my place to—"

"I've been suspicious all along," said Byakuya. "Toko approached me in the library. She told me about her feelings, but also that a dark secret—a killer—lived inside her, and made me promise not to tell. Since then, I've been keeping an eye on her."

"If you swore not to tell her secret, why are saying anything now?" asked Junko. "What is wrong with you?"

"The fact that you're more concerned with me breaking a little promise than the existence of a violent killer is... certainly interesting," said Byakuya. "We must have different priorities."

"You. Are seriously all kinds of fucked up," said Leon.

"Oh, come on," said Byakuya. "As one of the primary suspects, I would think you'd want any excuse to clear your name. If anything, you should be thanking me."

"I c-can't believe you lied to me!" said Toko.

"You only have yourself to blame—you came to me with your tragic little story. I didn't ask you to. This is the real world. Not some romantic fantasy fairy tale. Besides, I wasn't the only one to break a promise, was I? You swore that you would never let Sparkling Justice hurt anyone as long as you were here, and, well, I think we can all see what happened."

"Y-Y-You said that you w-would go out with me!" said Toko, shaking her head, tugging at her braids, just a mess of tears and anxious sweat. "That's the only reason I told you. You p-p-promised, if I was good, you would g-go out with me!"

"Don't be ridiculous. How do many times do I have to tell you. Why would I ever say a thing like that? It's just too bad you couldn't keep your promise. You just couldn't resist that rush you got from killing, could you? What a shame. Makoto was one of the few students who actually had, you
Toko was outright sobbing. "I t-tried. I s-s-s-swear I—I tried to cont-trol it! It—it wasn't me!"

I hated this. I hated everything about it. I couldn't even watch, I was so sick to my stomach.

"I h-hate you," said Toko, venom and desperation directed at Byakuya in a way that I'd never anticipated. Not toward Byakuya, the man she'd so idealized. "I hate you!"

"Byakuya!" said Hina. "Stop it! You're just making it worse! You're going to aggravate her!"

"Isn't that the point?" asked Byakuya. "What else could you have to offer us?" he said to Toko. "Now all that's left is to hear from the person in question directly."

"The p-p-person?" asked Toko, white as a sheet, a mess of tears and sweat and practically frothing at the mouth with spit, hair standing on end as she yanked at her braids. "Y-Y-You don't m-m-mean..."

Toko's body suddenly lunged backwards. A huge thud echoed across the courtroom, Toko passed out on the ground. But in the next second, before we could even react...

"Well, hello there! Is it me you were hoping to see?"

A new, completely unique voice came from Toko's body. Her stutter was gone, replaced by a completely different intonation—dramatic, attention-grabbing, full of life. Confident. The complete opposite of Toko. There was even something about the way she carried herself—upright and standing her ground, no longer seeming to close in on herself. Whoever this was had the most maniacal lively grin on her face. It would have lived somewhere in the home between inviting and disturbing, if it weren't for the grotesque bright red tongue just hanging out of her mouth.

And her eyes... Her eyes seemed to swirl with bright red.

At this, everyone else in the room gasped.

"So you figured it out, huh?" she continued. "Well, whatever! What're ya gonna do? I'm the Ultimate Murderous Fiend, Sparkling Justice! But you can call me Justice! Or maybe Jill! I've never had a nickname before, but it just feels right! In fact, I've never even been out in public like this before! Isn't it exciting?"

"Whoa! What the heck?" cried Hiro. "It really is Sparkling Justice! Please don't hurt me!"

"What the fuck is this?" Mondo was more shaken than I'd ever seen him.

"Don't worry, Palm Tree!" said Justice. "I only punish bad boys! So unless you've been very naughty, then I'm not gonna waste my time! Don't try hiding anything from me. Sparkling Justice always finds out the truth." She winked. "Then again..." she mused. "I've never let so many people see the real me before. The jury's still out on whether I'm going to keep you all alive. This is exciting! I'm like a total wild card. Who knows what I might do!"

She cackled, the sound echoing relentlessly throughout the courtroom.

"What have you done with Toko?" demanded Taka. "Is she alright?"

"Relaaaax," said Justice, waving a hand carelessly and nodded her head. "You seem uptight. Boy, I can tell, you must be fun at parties. Toko is fine! Well, about as fine as someone as sad and pathetic
as her can be. Poor thing, isn't she just so lucky she has someone like me around to keep her safe?"

"Keep her safe?" asked Hina. "What are talking about? How can someone like you keep her safe?"

"By continuing my quest!" When all she got was blank stares, she added, "By ridding this world of
the true scum of the Earth!"

"This girl is… something else," said Junko, sounding both disturbed and impressed. She crossed her
arms, appraising Justice up and down. I didn't like the little amused smirk on her face.

"Why, thank you!" said Justice, beaming with pride in a way that was almost endearing.

"This one is certainly different from the one we have come to know," said Celeste.

"I like to consider us two sides of the same coin!" said Justice. "Behind every dark and gloomy soul
lives another that shines as bright as the sun! We can't choose what we're good at. The Ultimates
should know that more than anyone! Everyone has a gift—so what if my talent happens to be
killing?"

"But—" began Taka. "But that is wrong! How can you be so callous about taking another human
life? Murder is wrong! You—how are you not in jail?"

"'Murder is wrong'. Well, aren't you a perceptive little one?" cooed Justice. "Perhaps if you knew the
kind of people I go after, you would change your tune. But then again, maybe not! It's small-minded
people like you that really drive me crazy. You're always afraid of results. The world isn't black and
white. Why am I not in jail? Because if the system actually worked to punish the bad guys then I
wouldn't have to do my job. Maybe I should be grateful. After all, what kind of boring world would
that be?"

She cackled again.

"Hey, uh, Justice? Jill? Whatever we should call you…" said Leon. "Quick question."

"What's up, Flame-o?" asked Justice, stopping her cackling as if called to attention, her mood chipper
once more.

"What did you call—Uh, you know what, forget it," said Leon. "A few of us thought you might be
the mastermind behind the whole, uh, this," he said, gesturing all around. "Can we get a yay or
nay?"

"Oh, conspiracy!" said Justice, clapping her hands together like an excited child. "I like it! Well,
cutie, since you've been just so darn polite, I will gladly tell you. I am the mastermind of all
masterminds!"

A pause.

"Just kidding!"

"So… it's not true?" asked Sayaka.

"Of course it's not true!" said Monokuma with a laugh. "How dare you try to link me to that
creepazoid!"

"Honestly," said Justice, "Seeing this whole fucked up shindig, I don't know whether to be horrified
or impressed. While I'm a sucker for torture, this isn't really my cup of tea. Besides, my MO is
punishment only for those who deserve it! I don't just go looking for excuses to take out any old schlub! While I'm sure you've all been very naughty, I'm a bit of a newbie here, and if I don't know the dirt then I just can't do the crime! I have standards, you know. I am after all the Ultimate Murderous Fiend."

"If this doesn't show you guys how powerless the outside world truly is, I don't know what else I can do to convince you!" said Monokuma. "Police, government, society. I mean, they all just let this bloodthirsty maniac go buck wild all over town!"

"Are you kidding?" cried Justice. "They're the reason I exist at all! Pain only produces pain, after all. Failure to apprehend me is just the tip of the iceberg. Sure, I'm a bloodthirsty monster, but I'm doing a service to society. Even if I'm not doing it for them! I'm doing it for us."

"Us?" asked Taka.

"For Gloomy. And my own gratification, of course!"

"So it's true!" said Hina. "You really are the real Sparkling Justice!"

"As real as I'll ever be, baby!" said Justice. She struck a pose, pulling out her mask and putting it on.

"Justice complete! The center of justice that is pierced by justice! The lead star of justice that shines in the night sky! That would be me... Sparkling Justice!"

Hiro gasped, staggering back in full panic. "It's her! It's the real Sparkling Justice!"

"This should be enough to convince you," said Byakuya, still perfectly calm and collected despite the panicked, alarmed faces of everyone else in the room. "This murderous fiend is the culprit we've been looking for. There's clearly a motive, so there should be no doubt."

"What motive?" asked Chihiro.

"Our secrets," said Byakuya. "If I am right in assuming that Toko's secret was about Sparkling Justice, then she had a very clear motive to never have that side of herself exposed."

Justice gasped, taking off her mask. "Who is this handsome young gentleman with the big ideas?" she said, practically giddy with excitement. "Honestly, for spilling my big secret, I probably ought to kill you, but you're just so darn cute I just might let this one pass. You're on thin ice though. Thin, thin ice."

"Quit dodging the accusation!" said Mondo. "Did you do it?"

"Do what?" asked Justice.

"Did you, or did you not kill Makoto?" asked Celeste. "It is a simple question."

"And I'm so very happy to answer it, Morticia!" said Justice. "But not before you do me a solid and answer me one right back." She looked to everyone in the room.

"Who is Makoto?"

Silence.

Sayaka spoke first. "What... What do you mean?" she asked. "You—you're a monster! I thought you killed him."
Justice tapped the side of her forehead. "Can't kill someone you don't know exists, Barbie. Listen, I've been kinda, mostly dormant for a hot sec, so there may be stuff in Gloomy's life that I may have missed now and then."


"I don't trust her," growled Mondo, glaring at her. "She could just be playing dumb."

"How do you expect any of us to believe a word you say, you monster!" said Taka.

Justice sighed. "It's always the ones with hard-ons for authority that get sooo bent up. Look, if I was the culprit, I would just tell you. Since you're so hell-bent on proving me guilty, what's my motive?"

"What?" asked Taka.

"My motive!" said Justice. "What reason would I have to kill this Mako boy?"

"It's Makoto," said Byakuya.

"Come on, Handsome," said Justice. "You seem to be the expert on all things me! I have my very own personal stalker! I'm flattered. So. What really gets me going?" She was teasing him, egging him on, enjoying the limelight, practically giggling with delight.

I tried to reflect on everything I'd gone over in the file. What was the commonality between all the cases?

"What—What are you saying?" asked Chihiro.

"Come on, sweetie, what's the pattern?" asked Justice.

I finally spoke. "According to the file, Sparkling Justice only kills abusers." I looked to her. "Isn't that right?"

"Bingo!" She cackled, putting a finger to her nose. "Right on the money! Someone apparently knows what their doing!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Taka.

"According to the case files, all the victims have something in common," I said. "Sparkling Justice only kills other criminals. Especially ones who have a history of violence and abuse."

"That's right! All the people I kill with such passion and conviction—they're all criminals! Bad boys, if you will. The Gloomy One just hates it! Says I'm ruining her. Making her life a living hell, yada, yada, yada. Everything I do for her, for us, and she takes it for granted. Can't she see that I'm only looking out for her? All those people, good riddance they're gone! And you people call me a monster!" said Justice. "How's that for the 'murder is always wrong', crowd? You should see the horror shows I go after!"

"Are telling me that Makoto is a criminal?" asked Junko. "You expect me to believe Makoto's ever done a bad thing in his life?"

"Exactly!" Justice cackled again. "Normally this would be my time to schpiel about how anyone can secretly be rotten in their core. Some of them look just as sweet and innocent as your boy Big Mac,
here! But I didn't even know the kid! And believe me, I always do my research. I realize that I'm known for going after criminals, but I'm not interested in your average petty thief! I may be a bloodthirsty killer, but even I hold myself to some form of rules! I'm only interested in the real scumbags. I know a creep when I see one!"

"Maybe so," said Byakuya, "But practically anyone would have the will to murder even an innocent person when backed enough into a corner. And Monokuma revealing your secret definitely gives you impetus."

"Fair point," said Justice. "But the motive isn't the only glaring problem with your argument. I'm a professional, you see! I have a very particular way of doing things!"

"So what's the problem?" asked Kyoko.

The answer hit me. "The calling card," I whispered.

"Sorry, dear!" said Justice. "Come again?"

"Your mask. Why would you leave your mask at the crime scene?"

"Ding ding ding!" said Justice. "Aren't you just precious? That's two for two now!"

"We get it," said Byakuya. "You've clearly explained your hobby and your philosophy. But that's not all there is to it. It's a different matter entirely… when you're forced to kill in order to survive."

"Keep your mouth shut, asshole!" said Justice.

"Asshole?" asked Byakuya, surprisingly shaken. It was odd. He'd certainly heard worse from Junko, but for some reason he seemed much more bothered than usual.

"I would never kill for a reason as petty as mere survival!" said Justice. "Even for an asshole like you. And even if in some fluke I did kill to survive, why would I bother with the calling card? It'd make me the obvious suspect! I take pride in my work! Why would I call attention to a freak accident where by chance I off some random douchebag? My calling card is a warning! What good would it do to confuse people? I have a message to send to the world! My streak would be ruined. I hate inconsistency."

"That… does make some amount of sense," said Celeste.

"Yeah, but," said Junko. "Even after all that, it's still just your word against Byakuya's. And you know how I feel about him, but at least he's not a serial killer."

"Eeehh!" Justice made a loud buzzer noise with her mouth, making an "x" motion with her hands. "Ad hominem abusive!"

"Perhaps if you had an alibi…" mused Celeste. "It might be another story."

Justice quirked an eyebrow. "An alibi, aye? Anyone happen to know what the Gloomy Fangirl Freak might've been up to last night? I haven't had a night out on the town in a while, but we do share the same body after all. Kyehahaha!"

For a moment, everyone looked around to each other in silence. Then, Hina raised her hand, taking a deep breath.

"Look," said Hina. "As much as I think you're horrible and crazy, I have to say something. I don't
think the killer can be Toko... or Jill."

"Why do you say that?" asked Celeste.

"Because... Toko was with me all last night," said Hina.

"What?" cried Hiro with a gasp.

"Why didn't you say that in the first place!" cried Junko.

"I'm sorry!" said Hina, glaring at them. "I didn't know it mattered!"

"Hang on," said Leon. "What do you mean 'with you'?"

Hina grit her teeth. "I am going to kick your ass. Look, the only reason I didn't say anything is because Toko begged me to keep it a secret. And I wasn't gonna say anything but. She's not here right now. And she needs an alibi. As much as we—well... As much we've fought, I can't let an innocent person go down for this. One mistake kills us all."

"So you're an altruist, now?" said Celeste. "You've certainly changed your tune since the last trial. One might even call it growth."

"Lay off," said Mondo. "Forget about all that, let's focus on what really matters here!"

"Yes!" said Taka. "What matters is that Toko's got an alibi!"

"Toko stayed with me last night," said Hina. "She said she was 'feeling switchy'. I didn't know what that meant, but it sounded bad. She seemed scared, so, of course, I let her stay. I know we haven't always gotten along, but she told me that she was afraid of being left alone. I figured it was about the motive or something. She was acting weird all night."

Justice gasped. "I remember you! Only glimpses. I was only out for a minute or so. But I'd never forget a pretty face like yours. Or a rack like yours either." She lowers her glasses to peer over them, wolf-whistling comically.

Hina grimaced, blushing bright red. "Don't make me regret defending you. I still think you're disgusting."

"It's okay, Honey," said Justice.

"It's Hina," corrected Hina under her breath, but Justice ignored her.

"You don't need to love me. You've done plenty!" said Justice. "But now that my oh-so-innocent name has been cleared, it's just got a serial killer wondering. Who did plant the mask? They've nearly soiled my good reputation!"

"Good... reputation?" scoffed Junko. "You must be joking."

"Well," said Kyoko. "Chihiro was the first one to bring up the theory, but the one who pushed the most for the Sparking Justice suspect was... you, Byakuya." She turned to look directly at him.

For a moment, he said nothing. Then... He chuckled. Actually, chuckled.

"Fine. I own up to it."

"Why are you being so calm about this?" screamed Hina. "You did it! You're the one who planted
"I own up to tampering with the crime scene," said Byakuya. "It'd be better if you had more evidence to back up your claim, but I'll make this easy for you. If you want to prove that I'm the culprit, you'll have to try a little harder."

"You—You actually did that?" said Hina. "You're sick! You know that?"

"How in that fucked up head of yours could you even begin to think that was okay?" asked Leon.

"I don't expect simple-minded—" began Byakuya, but Leon cut him off.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Call me whatever you like, simple-minded, stupid, idiotic. I've heard it all before," snapped Leon.

"Why the fuck would you do something like that?" Junko asked Byakuya.

"Because it made the trial more interesting?" said Byakuya. "Next question, or are we done here?"

"God, you fuckin weirdo," said Leon. "I bet you did kill him."

Junko sighed in frustration, throwing her hands up. "This was just a huge waste of time! All that, and we still don't have a suspect!"

"Actually, yes we do," said Hina. "Since it clearly wasn't Toko, the only suspect we really have... is Leon."

"H-Hang on a sec," said Leon. "Byakuya tampered with the crime scene! Doesn't that make him at least equally as suspicious?"

"But we don't have anything else on him!" said Junko. "So as soon as you find something, by all means, share it."

"Wait," said Leon. "Byakuya tampered with the crime scene."

"Yes," said Junko. "We know that already, Genius."

"No," said Leon. "Byakuya tampered with the crime scene."

"I... honestly don't get what you're playing at," said Junko with a sigh.

I didn't get it either.

"He was at the crime scene!" said Leon. "Don't you see? He was at the crime scene!"

"Saying it more than once isn't gonna make it start making sense," said Junko.

"Monokuma!" said Leon to the bear who had been drifting off in his seat.

"Whuh?" said Monokuma with a yawn. "I'm awake! I'm awake, I'm awake!" he cried, coming to his senses. "What is up?"

"When do you deliver the body discovery announcement?" asked Leon.

"Awww, that's all?" asked Monokuma. "No developments yet? I thought I was being woken up for something actually interesting!"
"Just answer the question," said Mondo.

"The body discovery announcement is delivered once three or more people discover a body!" said Monokuma.

"And it's precise?" asked Leon.

"Yes!" said Monokuma. "I keep a close eye on you critters, so it is very accurate!"

"Three people?" asked Leon.

"Yes," said Monokuma.

"Three," he said again. "Always three. Unless more than three arrive at the same time. Right?"

"Yes!" said Monokuma, growing more and more irritated.

"Leon, what are you getting at?" asked Hina. Her voice was exasperated. Tired.

"I swear this has a point," Leon said to her. He looked back to Monokuma, on high alert now, as if hanging onto his every word. "Does that include the culprit?"

"I'm sorry, does what include the culprit?" asked Monokuma.

"Don't beat around the question!" said Leon. "Does the culprit count in the three people when you make the announcement?"

Monokuma didn't answer.

"Do they count?" demanded Leon.

Monokuma still looked hesitant to answer. "It… depends on the case."

"Well, for this case," cut in Kyoko. "Tell us the truth."

Monokuma looked sullen. "You aren't supposed to use the body discovery announcement as evidence!"

"Well, that's too bad," said Junko. "We're using what we got here, so you're going to answer the question."

"The culprit… doesn't count," admitted Monokuma.

"Even if they come back later?" prompted Leon, eyes wide. He was more attentive than I'd ever seen him, like his life depended on it. It occurred to me that his life probably did depend on the answer.

"Yes! After all, you can't re-discover a body. Especially when you're the one that put it there in the first place! That wouldn't make any sense! Are we done now? I want to get back to my nap!"

Monokuma was definitely irritated.

We all looked at one another.

"Well?" asked Celeste. "What does that even mean?"

Leon didn't answer. Instead, he let out a deep sigh of relief. And, to my utter bewilderment, he began to laugh.
Weakly. Shakily, but it was definitely a laugh.

I couldn't understand what on Earth was so funny.

Junko voiced my confusion out loud. "What the hell is so funny?"

Leon wiped at his eyes, continuing to laugh silently. "Don't you get it? It can't be me! I'm the third person!"

And then, it clicked.

"Ya lost me there, kid," said Mondo.

"He's the third person to discover the body," I explained.

"The announcement didn't go off until after I'd already arrived on scene!" said Leon. "I thought I was the third person to find it, but since Byakuya admitted to tampering with the body, that proves I should have been the fourth!"

"But, that still checks out," said Sayaka. "The body discovery announcement goes off once three or more people discover a body, remember?"

"It could have been a delayed announcement," said Celeste.

"But that rule refers to when multiple people arrive at a time! Why would the announcement go off at four people when it had all this time to go off at three? That's inconsistent with the rules."

"But… I don't get why the announcement would be delayed to go off at four people," said Chihiro.

"Because, like Monokuma said, you can't re-discover a body," said Kyoko. "They didn't count as one of the three."

"So… The real culprit must've been one of the first few people to 'find' Makoto!" said Taka.

"Exactly! I should be the fourth person to discover the body, but I'm the third!" said Leon.

"I—I really don't—" began Hina, still looking as confused as ever.

"It's ok," I said. "We'll go through it right now. In order."

"Okay!" said Leon. "Who was the first person to discover the body?"

"... Byakuya?" said Hina.

"Right! Who was the second?"

"Mukuro and Sayaka were second and third," said Hiro.

"Right again!" Leon counted them off again on his fingers. "One was Byakuya. Two was Mukuro. Three was Sayaka. And I'm the fourth! But. The announcement isn't supposed to go off after four, does it? It goes off after three."

"You're just saying numbers!" said Junko.

"It… makes sense if you think about it," I said.

"The culprit doesn't count among the three," said Kyoko. "Right? A culprit can't discover a body."
They can't discover a death that they caused."

"That is so confusing," muttered Sayaka.

"But," said Kyoko, "it greatly narrows the possibilities when it comes to suspects. Which is something I bet Monokuma never anticipated."

Monokuma hung his head in dejection. "The body discovery announcement. Used as a weapon against me. How could my own paws betray me like this?"

"Quit being so melodramatic," said Junko.

"It also rules out suicide as an option," said Celeste.

"So what you're saying is…" said Hina.

"Thanks to Monokuma's little slip-up we now know. The culprit can only be one of three people," said Kyoko. "Byakuya. Sayaka. Or Mukuro."

All eyes fell upon the three of us.


"'Well done'?” asked Leon, incredulous. "I narrow down the list of suspects to three people that includes you and all you can say is 'well done'?

Byakuya shrugged. "I can't deny facts."

Leon snorted. "Obviously, it's Byakuya," he said. "I mean, you all saw how much time he spent trying to deflect blame to Toko. And he's also the least bent up about Makoto."

"He… certainly is suspicious," said Celeste.

"And only a boy would have access to the boys locker room!" said Taka.

"Hang on," said Kyoko. "Let's make sure of that first."

"Why do even we need to check?" asked Hina.

"Kyoko, I agree with Hina," said Sayaka. "I don't see how a girl would even have access the boys room."

"I… I can think of a way," said Byakuya. "How about this for a theory. A girl could have access if… she met Makoto on the pool deck, then got into the boys locker room from the entrance on that side."

"But, the doors have locks that way, too," said Leon.

"Yes, exactly," said Sayaka.

"Well," said Byakuya. "A female victim could have used Makoto's ID to get in."

"I did find it in his pocket during my investigation," I said, my voice hollow. "The culprit could have used it, and left it there."

It wasn't me. Which meant there were only two possibilities… And one of them...
"Why would you say that?" said Junko. "You're just going to implicate yourself, you know that right?"

I shrugged, still finding it hard to emote. "We... have to explore all the possibilities. It's my job. I have discover the truth." I said the words, but for once, they felt hollow. Meaningless.

Strangely, I felt little fear for my own life. I knew that I was innocent. That was enough for me. I hoped the others would see that. But, if it wasn't Byakuya…

What was the point of the truth if it led to an answer you didn't want to hear?

I wanted to believe in innocence. Still, in order to believe, you had to overcome doubt. If Sayaka was innocent, we'd know by the end. We had to follow this train of thought to the end. The truth would come out. I believed that.

"Hang on," said Junko. "Is that even allowed?"

"Is what allowed?" I asked.

"Using another person's ID," said Junko.

Byakuya looked to Monokuma. "Well?"

Monokuma giggled behind his paws, giddy with delight. "I see you found my loophole! Yes, lending your handbook to another student is forbidden, but there is no rule against taking a handbook without permission! And since the victims are no longer alive, they technically do not count as students. Therefore, it's not lending! Puhuhuhuhuhu!"

"What a reach," muttered Junko.

"You planned this on purpose, didn't you?" asked Byakuya. "You kept the wording ambiguous for this exact reason."

"Well... things were getting slow again," mused Monokuma. "I wanted to... give you guys an extra push! That's all!"

"Ok, but... where does that leave us?" asked Chihiro. "We tried to narrow the suspects, but it still is down to three people. Is there anything else we have to go off of?"

"I hate to say it," said Hina. "But does anyone else think it might be Mukuro?"

"I feel that," said Leon. "I mean, how can we trust anything Mukuro says? For all we know, she—she could have been feeding us the wrong information this whole time!"

A faint rumbling grew as I could hear the others whispering to each other.

"Because everything checks out," said Kyoko. "Mukuro doesn't do our thinking for us. She can extrapolate points from her investigation, but it was all already there. We just needed someone to point us in the right direction. You already knew Makoto received CPR. Chihiro and Byakuya both put together the identity of Sparkling Justice. And you were the one who used the body discovery announcement as evidence."

"But being good at solving mysteries is just the right background for knowing just how to get away with murder. Without arousing suspicion," said Leon. "I mean, out of the our leads, who are you more likely to buy? The model who can't look at a body without crying? The chick who studies dead
bodies for a living? Or the guy who literally tried to frame another student for murder because it would be fun?"

"You—you guys know me by now. You know there's no—no way I'm capable of killing anyone, let alone Makoto," said Sayaka, voice breaking as she began to sob once more.

"It's okay, Sayaka," I said. "Nobody is blaming you."

"Not yet," snickered Junko.

"I still think it's Byakuya," grumbled Leon.

"Oh… I'm not so sure," said Junko.

"What?" asked Hina. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see? Makoto has nail marks on his face," said Junko.

"What does that hafta do with anything?" asked Mondo.

"Compare the hands of our suspects," said Junko.

"Sayaka is the only one of the three suspects with long nails," said Kyoko. "And Mukuro wears gloves."

"Nobody wears gloves while swimming, genius," said Junko.

"So that means what, exactly?" asked Mondo.

"My point is that wearing long nails under gloves is both impractical and uncomfortable," said Kyoko. "Is this the case?"

"Yes," I said, the question straightforward, but I could feel the lump forming in my throat nonetheless. "I—I don't want to, but…" I took a deep breath. "I can show you, if you like."

"I—No, hang on a sec. That is such a fucking leap!" said Leon.

"I—I'm telling you it's not true." said Sayaka. "Why don't you believe me?"

"Hang on," I said. "Kyoko, I—that does seem a bit shaky," I said, but deep down I knew I was trying to convince myself just as much if not more than I was trying to convince her. Despite the fact that she was trying to clear my name, I… I didn't like this at all. "Isn't it our job to consider every possibility?"

"Such as?" asked Kyoko.

"Like… Me, for instance!" I said. "Why aren't you interrogating me? I'm just as suspicious."

"Fine," said Kyoko, but her tone was terse. She seemed to be losing patience. "Then explain the fingernail marks."

"This isn't right," said Hina. "I refuse to believe Sayaka could do something like this. Sayaka was there for me when I was—" She stopped, catching herself. She took a deep breath. "When I was… at my lowest point. Could some of you say the same thing?"

There was an uncomfortable silence.
"I—I don't want to do this to any of my friends," said Chihiro. "I can't do this again. I just can't."

Oh, how I wanted to believe Sayaka.

"Belief cannot be blind," said Kyoko. "Mukuro. You know this. It's not enough to put faith in blind trust."

"What does that even mean?" asked Junko.

"I believe what Kyoko is trying to say," said Taka. "Is that. Trust is... that much stronger if you can overcome doubt. If... you know the truth, then you can finally shake your doubt. But it has to be there. You can't just ignore it. You prove your doubts wrong. You prove you were right to believe."

"Exactly." Kyoko looked to me.

"... Okay," I said, finally surrendering. "Okay. Go on. I—I won't stop you."

For a moment, Sayaka said nothing. Then, "Mukuro... Is that really all you can say?" asked Sayaka.

I avoided her eyes.

"I thought you of all people would—would understand! I—I was so stupid!," said Sayaka. "Now I see for the first time what's going on. When placed under pressure, even a friend will turn their back on you."

"Sayaka, I—"

"I—I don't know why I was stupid enough to believe that you would be on my side. I—I trusted you. I just figured y—you would believe me. I should've known you'd choose to save your own skin," said Sayaka.

"That—That's not true!" I said. "That's not what I—"

"It is true!" she said, demeanor changing again as she seethed at me. "Look at yourself. You're willing to deflect blame onto anyone as long as it's not on you. It doesn't matter who you take down, as long as you get out of here unscathed."

"Sayaka. As much as I'd love to take your word for it," said Kyoko. "Sometimes, word isn't enough. Sometimes, all you can really trust is evidence."

"Well then," said Leon. "That just means—It's gotta be... If Sayaka is the killer—Then why does all the evidence seem to point to me? Explain that."

"Aw, and Area Man is so close to almost getting the point. You two are thick as thieves," said Junko. "It's adorable, really. I could throw up just thinking about it."

"Oh, sweetheart," tutted Justice, shaking her head. "Why does the evidence for killing her supposed crush all point to you? It's always about trying to get your dick wet, isn't it? But, I guess you're the lesser of two evils here. Put it together, sweetie." At the confused glances she was receiving, she just said, "What? I pick things up quick! Tell me you didn't miss their piping red hot romantic chemistry." She cackled gleefully. "You can practically cut through the tension with a knife! He wants in her pants, I can always tell."

"Fuck off!" said Leon. "You don't know shit, and if you think Sayaka would ever do that then you're wrong!"
"But, Jill, that doesn't make any sense," said Sayaka. "I can't believe any of you would think I would ever kill Makoto. You know how much I—I..."

"I've been trying to figure it out myself," said Byakuya. "Why someone like you would have reason to kill someone like Makoto. Surely it wasn't because someone as trusting and, well, naive as Makoto would be an ideal target." His voice was laced with sarcasm.

"Please," said Junko, rolling her eyes. "If she wanted to use someone who would be at her beck and call, I think you got the wrong guy."

"I'm telling you, that doesn't make any sense," said Leon. "But someone like Byakuya who has been shady from day one is way more suspicious! Like he would even need a motive to kill any one of us."

"I don't have a deathwish—as certain as I am that I could outsmart each and every one of you," said Byakuya. "If I were to commit the crime, you can trust me to wait for the opportune moment."

"How does 'Byakuya killed Makoto and tried to frame Toko' not sound like the clear solution here?" asked Leon.

"It would have to depend on the time," said Chihiro quietly, perhaps hoping the others would not hear.

Several heads turned to look at her in confusion.

"Byakuya spends a lot of time in the library," said Chihiro. "He was still there when I went to sleep around midnight."

"Yes. I left not long after," said Byakuya.

"The file states the time of death was around 11 p.m.," said Taka—who has already pulled out his handbook and was reading through the case file.

"So, then... it can't be Byakuya," said Hina, eyes wide with realization. "He has an alibi."

"Unfortunately, that appears to be the case," said Celeste.

"Unfortunately?" said Byakuya tersely.

"Oh, you know she prays for your death at least once a day," said Junko.

Justice sighed dramatically. "What a shame! I was really hoping for an excuse to kill him."

"Considering how he acts, I could make the argument that you still should," muttered Junko, but she was ignored.

"Well, with this new information, it would mean," said Celeste. "There are only two remaining suspects, and considering all the other evidence, the most likely suspect... is Sayaka."

I didn’t want it to be true. It couldn't be true. I'd been trying to block out this possibility from my mind—all trial trying to tell myself that it was Leon, then Byakuya. Certainly not Sayaka. Because... that would have been crazy, unthinkable even. I'd trusted her. She'd called me her friend for Christ's sake! If she was bad—what did that say about me?

"What?" asked Leon, sounding about as confused as I felt. "That has to be some kind of joke, right?"
"You're the one who really narrowed the list of suspects. You should know better than anyone that this is the truth," said Celeste.

"That—That's insane," said Sayaka. "How can you even say that? Is this even a discussion? Mukuro hasn't—I haven't been a suspect this entire trial. You don't even have evidence of involvement. Or a motive. This whole idea stems from a mistimed body discovery announcement and some shaky logic."

"But—" said Leon, struggling for words. "I mean—Come on. That can't be right. Byakuya is obviously the most suspicious one. Chihiro, are you sure he was there the whole time?" asked Leon.

I was equally as baffled as Leon, but I knew one thing for certain.

I was not the culprit.

"Positive," said Chihiro, frown on her tiny features. She didn't look happy to be giving that answer. "He's not hard to miss. I can hear him tapping from all the way—"

Byakuya cleared his throat, and Chihiro shook her head and lowered her gaze once more.

"Nevermind."

"What would I gain from killing Makoto?" asked Sayaka.

"Well… I dunno," said Mondo. "How 'bout this—what if it wasn't on purpose?"

"You mean an accident?" asked Celeste.

"Yeah, that's what 'not on purpose' means, " grumbled Mondo.

"I… I don't have to take this from anyone," said Sayaka, beginning to grow indignant. "How to you expect me to respond to these accusations until there's evidence?"

If it wasn't Byakuya, and it wasn't me, then…

"Sayaka," I said.

"Mukuro!" said Sayaka, relief washing over her expression. She trusted me. Which was going to make this hurt all the more. "Mukuro, you believe me, don't you? Tell them I'm innocent!"

"Did you kill him?" I asked. As if by some miracles being straight forward could will her to tell the truth. Whatever truth that may be. Whether I liked the answer or not.

"Of course, I didn't!" said Sayaka. "You know that!"

And just looking at her, seeing her face. I probably would have believed her. I wanted to believe her more than anything. And she sounded so honest, so desperate. Just begging me, her friend, to understand.

But it wasn't Byakuya. And it definitely wasn't me.

I don't know what I was expecting. Guilt? Remorse? Some sort of tearful confession? It was at this moment that I realized we were getting none of it.

And while a part of me wanted desperately to believe her, a stronger part of me hated her from killing Makoto. And then lying to me about it. All while insisting we were friends.
"Tell us the truth!" I demanded. "Did you kill him?"

She didn't answer.

I scowled, looking away at the floor. "I hate you... I'll never forgive you for this."

"Well then, Sayaka. If you're not the killer, whose fingernail marks are those found on the body?" asked Kyoko.

"I—I don't know!" said Sayaka. "Don't you guys get it? I don't know. I don't have the answers. I was so shaken this morning. Wouldn't you be, too, if you found your friend dead on the floor? I haven't been able to think straight all day. But I swear, it wasn't me!"

"Can you prove it?"

"Prove it?" asked Sayaka.

Leon stopped in realization, a complete change in mood. "Wait. Proof. Proof! Do you have any proof that Sayaka was the one in the pool room last night?"

"It's becoming clear that whatever is at the bottom of that pool is essential to solving this mystery!" said Taka.

"If only we knew what was there..." said Hina, sounded deflated.

Hiro gasped. "Field trip?"

Monokuma shook his head. "We don't have all day to fish some stupid scrap of junk out of a pool! This gets settled right here!"

"Look, that pool filter is fucked. Whoever went in there messed with the wires," said Junko. "We are not touching it."

"It's fine. We already know," said Byakuya.

"We do?" asked Chihiro.

"Well, I think we can figure it out," said Kyoko.

"How?" asked Hina.

"How about..." said Hiro. "Not by looking at what is there, but instead what isn't there."

"What do you mean?" asked Hina.

"I think he means," said Kyoko. "Not by looking at evidence we found, but by looking for evidence that is missing from the scene of the crime."

"Like what?" asked Hina.

"Well, we still haven't found a decisive murder weapon," said Taka.

"Do we really need to one?" asked Junko. "If the victim drowned, there may not have been any weapon involved—"

"One of the dumbbells is missing," said Mondo, cutting off Junko.
"What does that have to do with anything?" asked Hina.

"The locker room has a set amount of workout gear," said Taka.

"That could be it!" said Chihiro.

"But you guys were saying Makoto didn't suffer external trauma," said Hina.

"No, not like that," said Junko. "A dumbbell can weigh a person down. Catch my drift?"

"Ok… how does that help us?" asked Hina.

"Could be the object we found in the water," said Hiro. "Don'tcha think?"

"And there's one more thing," said Byakuya.

"And what is that?" asked Kyoko.

"One of the E-handbooks is missing," said Byakuya.

"Christ," muttered Junko. She glared at Byakuya. "Were you waiting to drop that bomb this whole time?"

"Never mind that! Which one is missing?" asked Hina earnestly. "That should at least give us something."

"We, um… We don't actually know," I said. "The remaining one is broken."

"It's like you want the culprit to go free," said Byakuya. I could almost feel him rolling his eyes. "I suppose hoping you could put it together was expecting too much."

I grit my teeth, glaring at him, but he ignored me.

"Well, wh—whatever it means, why does it even matter?" asked Mondo. "I'm sure it ain't important." He was avoiding everyone's gaze.

"Hang on," said Hiro. "I feel like I'm a step behind."

"What a shocker," muttered Junko, but Hiro ignored her.

"What E-handbooks are we talkin' about here?" he asked.

"The E-handbooks of the students who are—who have passed." I said. "They're being kept in a box in the entrance hall."

"Oh, right!" said Hiro. "That's where Sakura's and Hifumi's are being kept, yeah?"

"Yes, well. That is where they were being kept," said Byakuya.

"So cryptic," said Junko, shaking her head and muttering to herself.

"My question is," began Celeste, "why would the one remaining handbook be broken?"

"Well, that's easy," said Byakuya. "Mukuro?"

I shrugged, unable to muster up any kind of emotion. "It must have been destroyed," I said matter of factly. I was tired. Defeated. "But our IDs don't have many weak points. This we've confirmed with
"Yep!" said Monokuma. "In fact, the E-handbook only has one weakness! They're very durable!"

"And yet this one appears to be broken," said Celeste coolly.

"So…" said Hina impatiently. "What is it?"

"What is what?" asked Monokuma.

"What is the weakness!"

"Oh." Monokuma hung his head solemnly. He appeared to be pouting. "Well, if I tell you, you might use the secret to destroy your own!"

"Ugh, enough already!" said Junko. "Why would we destroy our own handbooks?"

I already had a hunch, but I wanted to hear it from Monokuma himself to confirm.

"Well…" said Monokuma. "If you must know, the E-Handbook's one weakness is it's poor resistance to fire and high heat!"

So it was just as I thought.

"That's all we needed to know," I said. I knew who that ID belonged to.

"But… as far as we know, neither Hifumi's nor Sakura's handbook have been exposed to heat," said Taka, confused expression on his face.

"Yes, but," I said, "We do know someone whose E-handbook has been exposed to extreme heat."

"We know someone who…" began Taka, puzzled expression on his heavily knit brow. "As in, you and I know someone?" Realization dawned on his face, nearly jumping in his seat. "Of course! That's right! We do know someone that fits the criteria!"

I nodded.

When Taka didn't elaborate any further, Junko spoke in her impatience.

"Well, who?" demanded Junko.

"I—" Taka hesitated, posture deflated as if suddenly unsure of his certainty. He frowned. It was clear he was trying not to give anything away, but his gaze turned directly to Mondo. "I don't know if—"

"It's fine." Mondo sighed, shaking his head and grumbling to himself. "Yeah, it's me."

"Sorry, brother!" said Taka. "I didn't mean to—"

"Nah, we're good!" said Mondo. "S'not a big deal. But yeah, I broke my ID the other day. I just didn't want to make this a whole weird thing."

"How?" asked Hina.

"How what?" asked Mondo.

"How'd you break it?" asked Hina. "Your E-handbook."
"If you guys remember Mondo and Taka's endurance competition," I said, "What you guys probably didn't know is that Mondo actually wore his clothes into the sauna."

"Yeah, yeah," said Mondo. "And in the process I may have gotten carried away and forgotten to take out my E-handbook."

"And so you swapped your handbook out with Hifumi's?" asked Celeste.

Mondo avoided meeting anyone's gaze. "Look, I know I'm already starting to build the rep that I'm reckless. I just figured I could swap 'em out without mentionin' it."

"I'm sorry, Mondo, for saying anything!" said Taka.

"Look, I said we're cool," said Mondo. "I mean for this? This shit's important. It—It ain't a problem, ya know? Besides," he added, much more quietly, "It's, I dunno, kinda cool that ya figured it out," he mumbled, scratching the back of his head and avoiding looking directly at his friend.

Of course, Taka had had a little help from me, but I decided to let him have this one. We needed at least one small victory today. With the rest of this process being downright miserable.

"So then we can conclude," said Celeste, "that the broken E-handbook found in the entrance hall does not belong to Sakura or Hifumi. Rather, it belongs to Mondo, yes?"

Mondo nodded. "Yep. I got his right here." He pulled Hifumi's E-handbook out of his coat pocket, turning it on and showing it to us. Sure enough, it had Hifumi's name on it.

"Well," said Celeste. "That is all very interesting. And I am glad to know where Hifumi's handbook has disappeared. However, I think we can all agree at the more imperative problem."

"By all means," said Byakuya.

"Where is Sakura's handbook?" asked Celeste. "As it happens, I'm afraid I'm all out of ideas."

"Same here," said Hina.

"Best guess? Probably at the bottom of the pool with the dumbbell the culprit used to drown Big Mac!" said Justice with a cackle.

Junko sighed, shuddering and grimacing as if trying to steel herself. "Byakuya, any ideas?"

"Let's just see where this goes."

I didn't like the smirk on his face.

"I don't see how any of this has any bearing on the trial!" said Leon. "Makoto was found in the boys locker room. Why does a girl's ID even matter for this case? You don't need a girl's ID to enter the boys room. This is so stupid!"

"Yes, but a girl does need a girl's ID just to generally exist in the day to day," I said.

"See, if we just abolished the need for gender markers on forms of identification, we wouldn't have these kinds of problems," said Hiro. "In fact, let's just be rid of all forms of ID."

"You had me for a sec there," said Junko, with a sigh.

"'Official identification' and 'record keeping' is just authoritarian propaganda!" said Hiro. "The less
people know about me the better!"

"Mondo's E-handbook was broken," said Sayaka. "That's why he took Hifumi's. My handbook is right here. In what situation would I have broken my handbook so badly that I need a replacement? Last time I checked, I've never gone in the sauna with my clothes on."

I didn't really have a rebuttal, but I just knew it was her. I just knew it. I couldn't articulate why I knew; maybe it was just because pressing on with this case was making me physically sick to my stomach. Instead, Kyoko answered for me.

"What if you didn't break it?" asked Kyoko. "What if you just... lost it?"

"Wh—what do you mean?" asked Sayaka.

"Well, if you misplaced it, I assume it would probably just turn up eventually," said Kyoko. "However, say you dropped it somewhere that made it nearly impossible to get back."

"Like, at the bottom of a ten foot pool, for instance," said Byakuya. "If you're a poor swimmer, I can't imagine you'd want to try to get that back."

"Oooooh," said Junko. "Which. You claim to be."

"That—" said Sayaka, eyes wide. "That doesn't have anything to do with—"

"You've seen Sayaka swim!" said Leon.

"Plenty of people can manage in the shallow end," said Junko. "In water over 10 feet deep? That's a different story. Would you risk going down there with the potential of drowning?"

"And that would give you reason to break the filter," I said. "Because you didn't want us to see whatever is at the bottom of that pool."

Sayaka looked positively backed into a corner. Like a deer caught in headlights. Luckily, someone came to her rescue, as always.

"Do you hear yourself?" said Leon. "All this is just speculation. Stupid, stupid, stupid! You need proof!"

"Well," I said. "You have the injuries to prove it. Don't you?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Sayaka.

"When Makoto struggled against you, he left injuries, didn't he?"

I thought back to that morning, before the investigation. I'd grabbed her arm, and she'd winced. I'd thought I'd been too rough, but that wasn't it, was it?

"I—I don't have to take this from you!" said Sayaka.

"Isn't that basically an admission of guilt?" asked Byakuya.

"I'm telling you, it's not what you think," said Sayaka.

"Sayaka," I said. It was one last implore.

"What?" She glared at me. I'd never seen her glare at me with so much malice and venom. With her
face contorted with rage, it was the first time I'd ever seen her look… ugly.

"It's over." My voice was dead. Defeated. "Just tell us. Then it'll be over. Do you have Sakura's E-handbook?"

"You can't just—" began Leon, but Sayaka cut him off.

"It's alright, Leon," she said.

She pulled out her handbook, turning it on to reveal Sakura's name on the opening screen—and the truth.

It wasn't really her handbook at all.

"It's right here."

"S—Sayaka?" Leon's eyes were wide. "So it really was you?"

"I'm sorry," said Sayaka.

"No!"

"Alright!" said Monokuma. "Well, I think that concludes our time. Everyone, put your votes in!"

"No! We're not done here!" said Leon.

"And make sure that everyone votes! You don't want to make a mistake. Who will be chosen as the blackened. Will you pick the right person? Or the dreadfully wrong one?"

"You're not listening to me!" said Leon.

But we couldn't stop. We had no other choice. All we could do was press forward. With a heavy heart and a trembling hand, I cast my vote for "Sayaka Maizono". The rest followed in suit, all but one. Until Monokuma snapped at him.

"Kuwata. You're the last one!"

Leon grit his teeth, steeling himself until he finally made a choice.

When all our votes were in, the monitor started up, the same monitor as last trial, and in slow forming block letters:

"SAYAKA MAIZONO IS FOUND: GUILTY"

Monokuma laughed. "Guessed right again! That's two for two now! You make me a proud papa bear."

Hina glared at him. "You're a monster," she said.

Monokuma ignored her. "But looks like we have another straggler. Mister Kuwata, what are you doing, voting for yourself? Not trying to pull a Hina, are we?"

"What am I doing? I—I refuse to believe it!" he said. "This has to be some sort of mistake. Come on, tell us the truth. Sayaka, you're no killer!"

Monokuma cooed. "Attachment sure is a funny thing, no? Ah, young love. To be young, and to feel
love's keen sting. Saw that in a movie once."

"It doesn't make any sense," said Leon. "Makoto trusted you. You trusted him! You—You guys were friends. Why would you do it?"

"I—I'm not a bloodthirsty killer," said Sayaka. "It was a mistake."

"A pretty deadly mistake if you ask me," said Junko.

"Even now you deny it?" asked Celeste.

"What the hell?" said Hina. "Killing someone is not just a mistake! You—You're a murderer!"

"No, that's not what I… I pulled him under," said Sayaka. "It's my fault. I regretted it as soon as it was over. As soon as I realized what I'd done."

"So you're the one who tried to save him," whispered Kyoko.

"I d-didn't know what to do," said Sayaka. "I panicked, but, it was too late to take it back so… I did the only thing I could. I took it as my way out. None of you are any different! What would you have done?"

"I would rather die than betray my friends!" said Taka.

"Well, Sayaka didn't feel the same way," said Byakuya. "Besides, who said anything about being friends?"

Hina gasped. "You—You comforted me! I trusted you! You said it was gonna be alright, I can't believe I fell for that!"

"Clearly, Sayaka is more deceptive than she lets on. You lured him there, didn't you?" said Byakuya. "Poor naive, trusting Makoto was the perfect victim. So happy to help. Not knowing it would lead to his death."

Sayaka said nothing.

Justice laughed raucously. "Damn! That's cold, and that's coming from me!"

Sayaka still refused to acknowledge them. Instead, she looked to me. "Mukuro?"

"Why would you do it?" I asked. I had to at least try.

"Why?" Monokuma cackled, cutting in before she could even answer. "For despair of course!"

"Shut up!" said Leon. He was boiling with rage, practically shaking. "You son of a bitch, just keep your mouth shut, this is all your fault!"

"Must've been one hell of a secret," said Junko.

"Secret?" asked Hiro.

"Our motives," said Celeste. "I see no other reason Sayaka would feel reason to kill a person like Makoto."

"My dream is everything," whispered Sayaka. "Without it, I have nothing. I am nothing. If anything compromised it, I— I'd die."
"Dream?" asked Chihiro.

"My talent. My career, my future, my dream. All of it. I didn't have any other future. If my secret got out, I—I'd be ruined."

"But you didn't have to kill!" said Hina. "Don't you see? That didn't have to be the answer."

"I didn't plan to!" said Sayaka. "It just… happened. When Monokuma revealed our second motive, I really thought it was going to be the end. If he had, everything would have been ruined. Everything I've worked for. Gone. All the guilt I'd been carrying around. For nothing. It really seemed hopeless. I felt nothing but despair. I thought my life was over. But…"

"But, what?" asked Chihiro.

"But—I know this is terrible… But when Makoto came to me, I saw a way out. I was so scared. When I realized I couldn't take it back. For the first time, I—" She looked up at us. "I felt hope."

"How can you say that?" asked Hina.

"I guess the lovely and beautiful Sayaka Maizono was not so lovely after all!" said Monokuma.

"I'm guessing whatever that secret was," said Byakuya, "must have been a threat to the image she had curated. That's why she had to keep it from ever getting out."

"What could possibly have been so bad that you would kill to keep it a secret?" demanded Hina.

Sayaka looked to Monokuma. "You've already destroyed everything," said Sayaka. "Must you take this away, too? Even my dignity? How can you bring me any lower?"

"I see I have you all on the edge of your seats!" said Monokuma. He yawned. "Honestly, what do want me to say? Your imagination could probably paint a better picture. What could I say that could possibly measure up to your fucked up expectations?"

"Nobody is asking you to tell us!" said Taka.

"I dunno, I kinda wanna know now," said Junko.

"Blah, blah, blah. She slept with people for jobs. She had work done. She pushed a rival down the stairs? Fill in the blanks, it's not that hard!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Mondo. "I think it matters a little bit! Those don't match up at all!"

Junko gasped. "Satomi Aoba?" She looked to Sayaka in wide-eyed shock. "That was you?"

"Who is Satomi Aoba?" asked Hiro.

"She's another one of those fashion girls," said Junko. "That girl is paralyzed! That whole incident is your fault?"

"I mean," said Monokuma. "That's just a theory. A murder theory! No, that doesn't work at all," he muttered to himself.

"Stop it!" I said. "Stop it, stop it, stop it! Can't you see what it's doing to her?"

Sayaka was pale, shivering, completely helpless.
"Enough already!" snapped Monokuma, growling. "I'm tired of this! I wanna get on with this stupid trial!"

"That's the problem, wasn't it?" said Sayaka. "Everyone, everyone, thought I was just so perfect. Makoto was so sure I was a good person. He believed in me. That we would all do the right thing. But that was his mistake. He tried to help, he really did, but it's no use. In my world it's near impossible to make it without sacrifice. It just doesn't happen. You won't survive. But I had to survive, no matter what it takes. People take one glance, and they think I must have it all. But you can't be perfect all the time. I guess I couldn't take the pressure, and I just… snapped. Makoto was a much better person than I'll ever be. I guess I was jealous. He was showing me everything I hated about myself. I'm not… I'm not good."

The room was silent.

"That's… not true," whispered Chihiro.

"What?" asked Sayaka.

"You're not bad."

"What are you talking about?" said Junko. "Chihiro, she killed Makoto. He is gone. That is--That is unforgivable."

"I know," said Chihiro. "But I don't think bad people don't feel bad for the things they've done. She may not be all good, but. She's not all bad."

"C'mon, you can't buy that! How do you know she's not just lying again, like she's been doing this whole goddamn time?" said Junko.

"Because… she did feel bad," I said, voice hush, unable to muster up strength.

I felt terrible. There was something about the way Sayaka was talking. She sounded so defeated. So alone. Like she was trying to remain with what little dignity she had.

I was sure she was the culprit. But there were aspects of the trial that were still confusing. If Sayaka couldn't swim well, why would she try to drown Makoto in deep water? What was the dumbbell for?

Then it struck me.

It was a mistake.

She had been telling the truth.

"Sis, what are you talking about?" asked Junko.

"She did try to save him. Don't you remember?" I asked.

"Remember what? Where's the evidence for that?" asked Junko.

"The CPR," I said. "Maybe we don't know why she did it. Maybe it was for the wrong reasons, or she just didn't want to get caught, or she really did feel bad. But she did try to save him."

Byakuya was wrong about one little detail. She hadn't tried to lure Makoto in at all.

"I—I know I screwed up," said Sayaka. "Just… even if you can't forgive me. I hope you'll find it in yourself to move forward. Eventually, even I'll be forgotten. I'll be ok. I suppose it's time for my
punishment. Once I'm gone, everything will go back to normal, and you guys will be better off without me, anyway."

"That's not true," I said. No matter what she had done, I couldn't truly believe we would be better off without her. My emotions were on a roller coaster today. From denial to disgust to hatred to pity, I'd give anything to just feel numb for a change. "I—I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" asked Sayaka.

"For... a lot of things. For saying a bunch of stuff I didn't mean. For not seeing it sooner," I said. "I should've seen it." All this praise about being perceptive, and somehow I missed it. "The dumbbell. You were at the pool late at night. Sayaka. Were you trying to--"

Sayaka's lip trembled. "There's nothing to see. I killed him. It doesn't matter why." Her voice was firm.

And that was her answer.

Perhaps I was wrong, but part of me was certain that really, she just didn't want the others to know. I couldn't imagine why she would be so secretive. But, I supposed if that was what she wanted, I wouldn't say anything. It would be the last thing I could do for her.

I didn't push the issue further.

"I suppose I should have counted on you to put together the mystery," Sayaka said to me. "You always were so smart. I guess I was a pretty poor assistant after all." She laughed, but the sound was weak.

I felt a lump in my throat.

She took another deep breath, trying her best for a smile. It was half-hearted at best. "I'm ready, Monokuma." She was putting on a brave face, but I saw fear in her eyes. "What's going to happen now?"

"What's going to happen now?" said Monokuma. "Why, execution, of course! I thought you knew the drill!"

"How can any of you be ok with what is happening?" asked Leon. "It's not right to punish her in this way! You can't just execute her!"

"Hey, we're not here to wax philosophical about morality and ethics!" said Monokuma. "We're here for punishment! People who disrupt the peace must pay the price! Good or bad person, that's the rule!"

"I don't give a shit about your rules!" screamed Leon, eyes bloodshot, practically tearing out his own hair in his anger. "Just because it's the rules doesn't make it right!"

"It's ok, Leon," said Sayaka. "I did something I can never take back. I—" She took a deep breath. "I should pay for this."

"No! You don't need to pay for anything! That's not how it works! That's not how any of this fuckin' works. If you want to make things right, you can't do that if you—" He stopped, eyes squeezing shutting as he tried to fight the tears. His voice was already getting choked up. "If you're—d-dead!"

"I am trying to make this right," said Sayaka. "I tried to hide what I'd done. I lied to you. To
everyone. I was the one tried to pin it on—on... I. I need to pay for what I did to y— to Makoto. To
everyone."

"That's right!" said Monokuma, positively beaming with glee. "So it's time to get moving along." He
looked to Leon. "Sorry, hon, that's just the way things work around here! I mean, how would that be
fair to the other culprits if I made an exception? I'd be a total hypocrite! Think of it this way! At least
it's her and not you!"

"Well, I don't care if it isn't fair. I'd rather have her here," said Leon, glowering at the floor. But
when it came out, it was suddenly much more quiet.

"I'm sorry, everyone," said Sayaka. "Please, just, try to forget this happened. Once you forget about
me, everything will be just fine. You all seem like you've become good friends, and I—I always felt
like I was watching from a distance. There's no need to despair. It'll better that I'm gone. That way
nothing like this will ever happen again. Don't waste your breath on me. Promise me you will never
allow for this kind of senseless killing ever again."

"Poor, poor, Sayaka," squawked Monokuma. "Dying utterly alone. What is more despair-inducing?
The death that causes others to suffer, or the death that is suffered purely in solitude?"

I wasn't listening to him. Instead, my eyes were on her.

"Hey," I said.

"Yes?" Sayaka glanced up upon hearing me address her.

"Did you mean it?" I asked. "All that stuff about—"

"About being your friend? Of course."

And although she'd lied enough for an eternity, I just believed her.

"How did you know that?" I asked. "I didn't even say—"

"You didn't have to say it," she said, beaming at me despite her wet eyes, with as much conviction as
the situation could allow. "I already knew. Because... I'm psychic!" She frowned. "You deserve a
better friend than me."

I wanted to protest. To tell her that wasn't true. But something in me couldn't. For some reason, the
words were caught in my throat, unable to force their way out.

"Leon?" she said, turning to him.

He fell to his knees, exhausted, drained, hopeless. Upon seeing his distress, she began to fret, rushing
over to him and wiping his tears.

"Oh, please don't cry, sweetie," she said, too sweet even when facing her impending doom. "Can I
ask you one last thing? Please forget me. I'd rather be forgotten than remembered like this. This entire
time, I've only felt despair, but if I can if I can fix this, if even some joy can come from this, maybe at
the very least I can die with... with hope."

"Don't you get it," he said, not looking up at her. "After all this time, you still don't get it."

"What?" asked Sayaka.

"Why couldn't you understand? You were never meaningless. I—I've never met anyone like you.
Always trying to smile through a problem. You didn't have to be perfect. You didn't even have to be good. You just had to be you."

"Leon, I--what are you saying?" she asked, eyes wide.

Leon glanced up at her, eyes wet and glistening. He began to cry again, voice barely coherent through the sobs wracking his body. "It's tearing me apart, Sayaka. How is this supposed to give me hope, when you're gone? Maybe that says something about me, about how I can't hate you, but I am drowning, Sayaka." He took a deep breath, trying to regain at least some of his composure. "But I swear to you, you are not going to leave here thinking that nobody cared about you because that is not true."

I watched, transfixed. Stupid as he might be, he was so much braver than I ever could be. Saying all the things I was too cowardly to say. I was ashamed.

"Leon…" said Sayaka.

Monokuma flashed a wide, sharp-toothed grin, sinister twinkle in his red eye. "Now then, let's begin! I've prepared a very special punishment for Sayaka Maizono, the Ultimate Fashionista!"

"Sayaka, please." He was begging now. "I-I can't do this. Please don't leave me. I need you. Monokuma, take me instead!"

"What do I look like, a waiter?" said Monokuma. "No substitutions!"

"P-Please. Take me. Son of a bitch, I'm telling you, take me! Monokuma, please! Please, help Sayaka!"

We all watched in amazement as Sayaka—who had been so practiced at carefully composing that cheerful facade, even up to her death—began to cry. Sure, she'd been seen in states of various distress during our stay, but this was different. Ugly, wet, tears began to pour down her face as she sobbed and wiped at her eyes. Bawling harder than I'd ever seen her, paying no heed to the swollen red around her eyes, or her runny snot-nosed tears, Monokuma began to cackle.

"Let's give it everything we've got! It's punishment time!"

This time, we had at least a vague idea of what might happen, but we were still unprepared.

The floor flipped out from underneath us, and I felt like my stomach had dropped out from underneath me as I watched the walls spin—trying to quell my dizziness. Instead of a courtroom, the ground shifted, lifting up to reveal a large catwalk. It seemed to go on for ages.

Blinding stage lights powered on, displaying Sayaka center stage for all the audience to see.

By audience, I meant the rows and rows of Monokumas. Some holding signs, some of encouragement, others of condemnation. All of them chatting idly, a low rumble in the background, every supposed conversation indiscernible. Some of them chanted her name.

"Sayaka! Sayaka! Sayaka!"

And of course, us, in chairs at the very front. I didn't know when or how we'd actually been seated, it just happened at some point.
Under the lights, Sayaka looked dazed and confused, and deathly pale. Like she might pass out any second. Besides the stage lights, several of the Monokuma's had cameras with bright flashing bulbs—the kind that clicked obnoxiously and took your eyesight out for several painful, enduring seconds. I could see why she looked so helpless.

For a moment, she just stood there, looking as confused as the rest of us. Everyone watched. Then from behind, another Monokuma nudged her forward.

She wobbled forward a few steps in her sky-high heels that had at some point been suited upon her person. Then she stumbled, nearly tripping before regaining her balance. The crowd murmured in response.

Realizing what she had to do, her expression became resolute. She began forward, her walk confident, and she was doing fine for several feet before all of us realized something was not right. The catwalk began to raise, and we realized it was narrowing more and more the closer to the end. It wasn't a catwalk at all.

She was high up, but we could still see the visible beads of sweat dripping down her forehead. Still, she did not falter.

Narrower.

It was the size of an average sidewalk.

Narrower.

The width of a balance beam.

Narrower.

Once it became no bigger than a tightrope, we were sure that would be her doom, but she was like a pro. Absolutely, one hundred percent in her element. Uneasy, but maybe even... confident.

Finally, she reached the end, but she couldn't even be afforded a sigh of relief because with Monokuma it was never that easy. By the end of the catwalk, the flashing lights were so blinding that she couldn't even see. Sayaka held up her hands to shield her eyes but it was no use. She was teetering on the edge, about to lose it when Monokuma, ever the intruder at the party, here to ruin any moment and destroy all hope, threw a tomato, hitting her in the head while the crowd booed.

It would have almost been comical if the fall hadn't been such a long way down.

She see screamed and fell, down, down, down. Finally, she stopped, seemingly caught in some sort of net, like a fly caught in a spider's web. But there was no reprieve, of course there fucking wasn't, because in the shadows what looked like a net revealed itself to be a tangled mess of clothes. Jackets, skirts, tights, scarves, sharp pins, sky-high stilettos, anything and everything you could possibly come up with and more.

With another scream, Sayaka struggled against the bonds, which only seemed to get worse the more she fought. As soon as one hand got free, or one leg, she'd just continue to struggle before falling back into the web—another limb getting stuck at an even worse angle in an ever worse position, and the process would start all over again. She was frantic, the bonds seemed to be pulling in different directions, stretching her, pulling her taut.
And as she began to panic she didn't seem to notice the pink ribbon that had slipped around her neck as she struggled helpless, pathetic, fruitless.

If only she knew what was happening. If only she could stop, but it was hopeless, somehow a losing battle even as she managed to finally wrench herself free. And I knew what was going to happen next.

Unable to bear the sight of it, I looked away, squeezing my eyes shut, but I heard the scream and the sudden halt as it came to a sickening snap.

As I opened my eyes again, the only thing I could make out was her shadow across the floor.

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I didn't look up until I saw the familiar courtroom floor return to us, and I was greeted, or more accurately bombarded, by Monokuma's smug mug.

*Another murder. Another execution.*

I wanted to hurl. Or die. Or both. Hell, to feel something, anything would be an improvement to this.

"Laugh at death, and your soul will forever be at peace," said Monokuma with a chuckle.

For just a moment, it made sense. Maybe I was going mad. Maybe I'd just let it happen. It'd be easier than facing the truth.

*The truth…*

No.

I was a detective. The truth was the only thing that mattered. Even if it was horrible, ugly, unpleasant, unwelcome. Without the truth, life was a lie.

But, of course, *he* had to break the silence.

"Well, that was certainly something," said Byakuya. "Not so engaging, but informative at the very least."

"Was any of that really necessary?" asked Kyoko.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," said Leon, glaring at Byakuya. Through his tears, he was seething—jaw clenched, hands balled into little fists, eyes burning. "Say another word, and I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?" taunted Byakuya. "Stutter at me? Face it, without me, you never would've had the brain cells to put this together."

Leon lunged at him.

"Leon!" said Hina. She was at his side in an instant, holding him back by one arm.

"He was able to help figure it out precisely *because* you couldn't help but meddle in things you ought not to meddle in," I said.

"And why not?" asked Byakuya. "It made things more interesting, did it not? Wouldn't it have just been so dull to say that I'd seen her leave the locker rooms—"
"You saw her?" bellowed Mondo, crying out it astonishment. "And you didn't say anything?"

"I see. So you broke the Nighttime Rule," said Celeste.

"I don't remember ever agreeing to that rule," said Byakuya.

She sighed. "It's fine. It is in the past."

"Why would you hide this from us?" asked Hiro, bewildered. "If we couldn't figure it out, all of us would have died!"

"Obviously, I would have said something before it got to that point," said Byakuya.

"Clever boy, aren't you?" said Monokuma. "You really are a nut. Is this a kinship I'm feeling?"

"You and I are nothing alike," said Byakuya, glaring at him. "Believe me, as soon as I get the chance, I will kill you."

"Aw, does the tinman actually have a heart?" said Junko. "Here to save us from the clutches of the evil mastermind? My hero!" She rolled her eyes.

He ignored her. "Don't take it to heart. I will stand alone as the victor. But Mukuro is right. You were surprisingly perceptive today, Leon. Not enough to be a threat, of course, but I'll just have to keep an eye on you when it's my turn to be the culprit."

Leon grit is teeth, wrenching against Hina's firm grasp. "Lemme at him!" he said, and I could tell Hina was struggling to restrain him. "Hina, let me go! I'm gonna fucking kill him!"

"Leon, please!" said Hina.

It was no use.

She tried again. "Please! You promised. Sayaka made us promise. No more fighting! No more murders."

That seemed to do the trick.

It took him a moment, but he finally relented, fists clenched at his side so hard his knuckles were white. "Fine. But only for Sayaka."

"Jesus, why are you so obsessed with her?" asked Junko. "It's a little weird."

"He's sad about his friend's death," said Celeste. "It is understandable."

"Can we not do this right now?" asked Hina. "Ease up a little, will ya? I… I get it."

Junko whistled. "Ok, but f.y.i., Leon, Sayaka did try to frame you, so not a very good friend if you ask me."

"Will you just stop?" said Leon.

"Look, I'm not the one putting a girl up on an idealized unreachable pedestal. Sucks having the halo taken away, doesn't it? The dream girl always turns out to be unattainable all along when she inevitably lets you down," said Junko. "Are you like this with every girl that will stand to talk to you, or just the pretty ones?"
"Quit it!"

"Or is it that you're so emotionally closed-off that you latched onto the the first girl you've finally connected with on a level past physical attraction?" said Junko. "Is that it?"

"Dude, she tried to frame you for murder," said Hiro, the rare occurrence of being in total agreement with Junko. "That's fucked up. Just, give it up. It think that's a deal-breaker."

"Ooh, I know!" said Junko. "I get it now! You finally found a woman to do all your emotional labor, and you'd deluded yourself into thinking it was gonna be _twue wuv_ forever? Is that it? That must be it."

"What is your goal here?" demanded Leon. "To make me feel bad? Because it's working. Do all of you really think so little of me? Are none of you even able to _humor_ the idea that I maybe, just _maybe_—I don't know—really liked this girl as person, and thought she was really cool? And maybe, just maybe… I was hoping she'd think I was cool, too? No, it always has be about Leon getting action! I have a beating heart! I'm multidimensional! Fuck!"

"But how can you forgive her so easily?" said Chihiro. "After all, she did try to…"

"Because… hating her only hurts _me_," said Leon. "I can spend my time blaming her, or I can blame the person who is really at fault." He glared at Monokuma. "I'm going to find you. And you're going to die."

Monokuma pointed to himself. "As much as I'd love to see you try, I believe 1v1 is only reserved for main characters!"

I was just as mystified as Leon at Monokuma's words, but luckily Kyoko interrupted before it could escalate any further.

"Why go to all this trouble?" asked Kyoko. "What are the point of these elaborate executions?"

"Puhuhuhu! Do you like them? Even if you don't, I think I can live with that. After all, all this punishment, all this despair is my gift to mankind itself! These punishments are meant to transform all hope to despair!"

If Makoto had been here, this surely would have been the part where he protested. Where he stood up against out captor, defiant and brave, insisting that we would never give in to despair.

But he wasn't here.

And, that feeling of despair at this absence… nearly overwhelmed me.

Luckily, at that moment, I felt something solid to anchor me—keep me grounded. To my right, Junko stood beside me, and when I looked down, I could see she was holding my hand.

"'Kuro," said Junko. "Are you alright?"

"They're gone…" I said, unable to say anything else or really even answer her question. "They're really gone."

"Isn't it delightful?" said Monokuma. "Oh, I'm just relishing in the _despair_!"

I missed Makoto. I missed Sayaka. I was a fool. Maybe that made me like Leon. Even after everything, I… I couldn't bring myself to hate her. Maybe I couldn't forgive her, but that didn't mean
I hated her.

"You talk a big game," said Junko to Monokuma, standing tall. "But you can take your despair and shove it where the sun doesn't shine."

"I—I'm no Makoto," said Taka. "But I think I can guess what he would say. And he would tell us to never give in to despair."

Junko looked to me, and although I was too worn to give her a smile, I did manage to give her hand a small squeeze. She returned the gesture.

It wasn't hope. But it was something.

Chapter End Notes

Trial 2: aka known as Time to Bully Leon aka How Can I Use my Lifeguarding Knowledge to Infodump in my Writing

Trying to give Leon and Sayaka personalities is so hard pls tell me if I did a good job. This chapter was rly hard, much harder than the last trial for some reason. I think Makoto being gone is just rly sad.

Also, I'm kind of... loving Jill. What do you guys think of the swap?
Intermission: Masterminds and Malasadas

Chapter Summary

First hints of the traitor, Leon is depressed, Hina shares some donuts, and they make an interesting new discovery!

Chapter Notes

I'm cheating for uploading this, but it's not from Mukuro's pov and this is technically still sorta in the original canon so this is just to tide y'all over until the real update comes. I swear it's not completely filler. TW for more suicide mention

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well, anyway, like I was saying… This is a pretty good spot… Yeah, a really good spot!" Monokuma gestured to the chair he sat in, indicating also to the impressive and expansive wall of monitors—capturing footage of the entire school.

He tutted, his tone disapproving. "That was a very interesting trial, but I didn't think we'd play our cards so soon." He sighed. "I'm disappointed in you."

He twisted his hands, playing with a red band and making yarn patterns with his paw as he grinned mischievously. "Anyway, isn't it amazing how that girl went and killed someone before things even had a chance to get boring? Once things really get moving, it'll be like a rollercoaster. There won't be any stopping it! Fear and despair charge forward at a speed nothing can hope to match." He sighed, but it was unclear whether it was genuine or an act. "But I must admit, I'm disappointed…"

The traitor stood still before him, waiting for him to continue.

"I went to all the pain and effort of making you part of the group, and you couldn't play your part. You do remember you were supposed to make the first move, right?" He waved his hand. "Well, no biggie. Nothing we can do about it now. So just do your best to make things more exciting from now on, okay? After all, that's what everyone wants to see..."

The dark figure spoke. "There's one thing I'd like to ask you."

"As long as you don't want to know my measurements, fire away!" said Monokuma.

"I know it is futile to ask, but the mastermind. Who is it? Who are you?"

"Guhaah! My my, you really took me by surprise there. I know I said you could ask anything, but… Super denied! Ultra denied! Demonic denied! Because you see… that's my ace in the hole. And nobody'd be dumb enough to reveal that, right? No matter how close they were to their 'friends'… Puhuhu… Puhuhuhu!"
At the sound of footsteps, Hina stopped nibbling on her malasada and glanced up to see who was entering the cafeteria.

"Leon?" she asked, eyes wide with surprise.

He looked wary. "Yeah?"

"What... are you doing up?" asked Hina, voice cautious.

Her eyes were darting, nervous, perhaps anxious for him. Or not wanting to set him off. He did not look in great shape. Granted, she couldn't say much. They were both dressed in nightwear—a strange sight for the both of them, but at least she'd managed to throw on a jacket over her tank.

Posture slumped, eyes red and puffy, and hair a mess; she was not used to this side of him.

He frowned, shooting her a questioning look. "I could ask you the same thing." When she didn't say anything, he added, looking down at the floor. "I felt like shit, so I decided to come here. Don't ask me why, I don't know."

"It's past Night Time," said Hina. "We're not supposed to be out."

"Yeah, and?"

The look he gave her told her not to push it further.

"And..." She considered her answer before continuing. "I won't tell Celeste if you won't," said Hina. "Deal?"

At this, he managed the smallest of smiles. "Deal."

Hina sighed. "I was feeling pretty bummed, and eating tends to make me feel better, so..." She shrugged, holding up the malasada in her hand and nudging the box with her other.

"Donuts?"

"Mhm."

"Well, I hope you brought enough to share," said Leon, not bothering to ask before pulling up a chair beside her and sitting down, reaching for the box.

She did not protest. Given the state he was in, she figured it was the least she could do.

He pulled out a malasada, tearing at it with his fingers as he began to shove the sugary contents into his mouth. "What are these?" he asked.

"Malasadas. Have you ever had them before?"

He shook his head, mouth too full to answer.

Hina continued. "They're better fresh, but..." The words died mid-sentence. He was too engrossed in his food to listen anyways.

Hina watched him a moment before speaking again. "What do you think?" she asked. "Donuts are my favorite."

Maybe it was silly, but after all this time, donuts had never done her wrong.
He laughed—the sound hoarse and harsh. "Yeah, I know." He popped another piece in his mouth. "They're fuckin' great. A1. These are really bad for you, by the way," he added, not catching the irony as he practically shoved another piece into his mouth, whole.

Hina raised an eyebrow at him. "What, are you my doctor or something?"

She was used to comments about her diet, or her weight. They didn’t bother her, except when people tried to frame it as a "health concern". Particularly boys who seemed to only care about whether all that extra food made her less attractive in their eyes.

Leon shook his head. "I didn't mean it as a bad thing." He continued to stuff his face. "I'm a hedonist. Do what you want. Besides," he added, lips smacking together, "the sooner my body falls apart the better."

Hina continued to watch him shovel food in his mouth, suddenly not hungry. Or, well… decidedly less hungry, deciding this was much more interesting.

"Careful," she said, trying to suppress an amused smile. Now was not the time for amused smiles. "Make sure you breathe."

"Fuck off," he said, even though his voice was muffled—mouth still full as he flipped her off. He swallowed, exhaling like it's the first time he could finally breathe, then licked the sugar off his fingers, clearly not caring about how it looked. He shrugged. "Maybe I'll choke. Who knows."

Hina reached a hand out to take another malasada, but Leon reached and arm out, walling the box off with his hand and shying it closer to him. "No way, man. Get your own."

"They are my own," muttered Hina to herself.

They sat together in silence before she decided to try again.

"You know," she said, "I used to say there wasn't a problem donuts can't fix."

"Do you really still believe that?" said Leon, shooting her a dubious expression.

She sighed. "I'm not so sure anymore. But it's the best thing we've got."

Leon grimaced. "Can donuts solve this?"

"I don't think so," said Hina. "But it's at least something to look forward to every day."

"Hmm… I do like donuts," he said. "But I'd hardly call them a reason to live."

She folded her arms, glancing down at the box. It was nearly empty—not the state it had been in before Leon had sat down.

"Do you want to talk about something?" she asked, trying to put on an air of concern.

The attempt was half-hearted at best.

It's not that she wasn't worried. She was. But she was bad at this. Especially when she wasn't in particularly great shape herself. She wasn't sure if she was emotionally in the right place to handle it if he were about to break down right there. Especially when she herself had shed some tears not long before, while alone in her room.

But she figured she should at least ask.
He paused just long enough to frown, scowling down at the donut in his hand. "What's there to talk about?" he said. "It's over. I mean…" His remaining hand clenched into a fist on the table, knuckles white. "Yeah. It's over. She's gone, and I'm stuffing my face, unable to do a goddamn thing about it."

He frowned, still looking at the donut he was holding. "I'm not really hungry anymore."

Leon made a face, throwing the piece in his hand, the last piece, to the ground with surprising force. "Fuck!" he said. "How the hell am I supposed to go on with my life? After that? After all this?"

"It's not easy," admitted Hina, voice low. It certainly hadn't been easy for her.

"I don't get it. How am I supposed to just go about my day?" he demanded. "Tell me. How does it get better? I hate this, I hate this so much. You got any more of this stuff?" asked Leon, his question catching her off-guard.

"I thought you weren't hungry," said Hina.

"I'm not," said Leon. He wiped at this mouth with the back of his hand. He stood up with a stretch. "Well, look at the time. Anyway, thanks for that, Hina. Been nice talking to you, but I'm heading off."

She was surprised by his abruptness. Just a moment before, he seemed on the edge of a breakdown. He began to head for the door when Hina called to him.

"Leon!"

He turned around. "Sup?"

"Are you—are you sure you're feeling alright?" she asked. "Are you ok?"

"Huh? Oh, hell no," he said. "Hah. Yeah, I'm not ok."

"I—I dunno if you should be alone right now."

"What's it matter?" he said, eyeing her with suspicion. "I mean, what's it to you? Are you offering to spend the night? Yeah, that's what I thought. Do we have any ice cream?"

He started heading for the kitchen, throwing Hina for a loop. He was all over the place.

By the time she'd caught up enough to follow him into the kitchen, he was already raiding the fridge. "You know, I wish you'd quit saying stuff like that," said Hina sternly.

"Like what?" He closed the fridge, cradling a pint of chocolate in one arm, holding a soda in the other.

"Like that. What you just said," said Hina. "I can't stand crude talk."

"Aw, you know I didn't mean anything by it. I—Fuck!"

"What's wrong?"

He looked around. "Where are the damn spoons?" he asked.

She frowned, rolling her eyes. "Top drawer, on the right."
"Dope." He went rummaging through the silverware.

"Still, I don't like it," said Hina, trying to ignore the loud clinking of the silverware knocking together.

"You're still on that?" he asked, picking up a spoon and looking back at her. "Alright, I'll knock it off. And I was thinking about it anyway, so, uh… Sorry about earlier. The dumb shit I said at the tri-well, you know. Besides, you can do better than Toko."

Hina bit back a laugh, eyes going wide. "Don't say that!" she said, both amused and astonished, trying to keep her voice hush despite the fact that nobody else was in the room.

"Ok, then scratch that, too," said Leon. The boy was on a roll. "But it's true." At seeing her expression, he added, "Relax, I'm not hitting on you. I wouldn't do that." He cracked open the lid to the carton. "Besides, what with everything that's happened, ya know, with Sakura, I thought you might be…"

"What?" she asked, suddenly on edge.

What about Sakura?

"Nothing. Forget it."

Now she was curious, but she didn't push it.

"Leon."

"What?" He scowled crossly, but it looked comical with a tiny spoon still in his mouth.

"Are you sure that you're feeling ok?"

"For fuck's sake! Quit asking me that!" said Leon. "No, I don't feel ok. I feel like death. It's like everywhere I look… I see her. And I don't know if I'm going crazy or if I already was! I'm tired, Hina. I'm exhausted, but I can't sleep. I spent hours crying in my room until there was nothing left. Don't tell anyone I said that. The only reason I came out is because I was hungry… and don't know how I'm gonna face everyone tomorrow." His voice was small. "Today. In the morning. Whatever." A pause. "I—Why are you looking at me like that?"

Hina eyed him thoughtfully. "You're very unusual for a boy. It's refreshing."

Leon snorted. "That's what you took away from all that?" he asked, like he couldn't believe it. He laughed weakly, sounding a little hysterical… but it was something.

He stopped. "How did you get over it?" he asked.

She was honest. "You don't."

Leon looked grimly at the carton of ice cream. "Well, that's just fan-fucking-tastic," he muttered.

"Oh, what do you want me to say?" snapped Hina, getting irritable. "It gets better? Because it doesn't. It's hard all the time, but I'm not supposed to say that, right, because I don't want you to do anything stupid!"

She regretted the words as soon as she said them.

"I'm sorry," said Hina. "I mean it though. Please don't do anything… drastic. I swear, there are still
good things, things to look forward to. Like… Like…"

Yet, for some reason, when pressed to come up with reasons to live, they seemed to escape her like water between her fingertips.

"Donuts?" he offered.

"Yeah," she said, relieved he'd given her an out—even if she was pretty sure he was being sarcastic. "Like donuts. And morning walks. And breakfast at night. And swi—I mean sports. And music. And cats, and… I don't know. And besides…” she admitted, voice small. "I've already lost too many friends."

For a moment, he said nothing. "I…” He looked like he was about to say something, expression softening. Then it was gone. He smiled wryly. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna kill myself if that's what you're worried about. I'm starting to really like malasadas."

"I'm glad," she said lamely, but there was a note of relief in her voice. She couldn't think of anything else to say. A thought struck her. "You should join me for my morning jogs! I think that would help you a lot."

He was wary. "I don't think that's such a good idea," he said.

"Come on, you'll like it!" she said.

He ignored this. "Ya know, you kinda remind me of her a bit," he said.

Hina wasn't sure whether to take that as a compliment or an insult. She could tell he was struggling for words.

"Like… you're both pretty and stuff, but besides that. There was this… quality."

"Quality?"

"Yeah, there's this quality about you. You're both… I don't know… Annoyingly chipper about everything," he frowned, brow furrowed as he tried to think. "Always trying to look on the bright side of things. But the difference was she was always trying to fix problems instead of feeling them. I… I dunno what I mean by that. It was… She was…”

He shook his head, trying again.

"Ya know, not that long after that first trial, we got into this huge fight. I'd never seen her that pissed before, it was… awesome."

She didn't say anything, not sure where exactly he was going with this story. Still, she waited, and sure enough, he continued.

"It was actually about you," he said.

"Me?"

"Yeah," he said. "Because she felt that we should all be putting in an effort to make you feel better. Ya know, making sure you were still a part of the group. Stuff like that. And, I, uh—well, after that whole stunt at the trial, I didn't really trust like that."

Hina hung her head, avoiding his gaze. "I don't blame you." She felt her ears grow hot, a feeling of shame making her sick to her stomach.
"Anyway," he said. "We made up, sorta, because she's Sayaka, and she's wonderful." He made a face as he said it. For some reason he sounded bitter. "And also I think she didn't want anyone to know, that we were fighting?" It came out like a question. "I don't know. Maybe she didn't want to cause any trouble. Or tip anyone off that something was wrong. But it wasn't really the same after that. I mean, we spent time together, but I could tell she wasn't really happy with me."

Hina didn't say anything.

Leon was looking away at the floor. He sniffed, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand, still holding his spoon. "And, uh… the worst part... The worst part is I--I never got the chance to apologize to her."

"Well. I'm sure she knew," said Hina, but it came out much more uncertain than intended. It was an empty platitude.

"Did she?" said Leon. He frowned. "I… I should've been there for her."

"It's not your fault. You can't change the past," said Hina. She was just repeating the words others had told her—what she continued to tell herself.

He eyed her with suspicion. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Because I'm worried—"

"No, no, cut the bullshit," said Leon. "Really, why are you being so nice to me?"

"I already told you. Because I don't want to lose another friend. And because… I think Junko was wrong about you," said Hina.

"In what way? If it's about my style, then, she might have a point. I mean, fine, I'll own that it's kinda tacky, but it's a look."

Hina snorted. "No, not that." He really was an interesting guy. Much more serious, she added, "You really did care about her, didn't you?"

He stopped, frozen where he stood, hesitant. "Well, what do you think?" And something about his manner told her that he really was anxious about her judgement.

"I think..." said Hina. "That boys don't waste time getting into fights about values with the girls they just want to sleep with."

Leon scoffed. "Have you met men? They'll 'well, actually' anyone and anything as long as they win at all costs."

"You think so? I guess I wouldn't know much about that, would I? Hmm… You're weird."

Leon did a pretend hair-flip. "I'm not like other girls." He took another spoonful of chocolate fudge, waving the tiny spoon around. "And I know I'm right. Hm. Maybe I need more male friends. Maybe that's the problem."

"I think you're fine the way you are," said Hina.

"That's very sweet of you, but in this state? No, I am not fine the way I am." He sighed. "I miss her. She hasn't even been gone a day, and I already miss her. And don't think I don't miss Makoto, too. I do! I can see why she liked him so much, he's… Anyways, it sucks that he's gone. Just… I miss her.
Like crazy."

She nodded. "I get it."

"It's complicated."

"Very complicated," said Hina. For a moment she said nothing, before adding quietly, "'You may have lost one friend. But you have us'."

"What was that?"

"Something Taka said to me," said Hina. "I thought it might make some sense."

"He said that to you?"

"Mhm."

"So he has emotions."

"Of course he does!" she said. "Taka has emotions! I know he seems stern, but he has them. They're just very intense ones!"

"I'm kidding." He rolled his eyes before adding, "It makes sense, by the way. Thanks." He paused, expression surprisingly pensive. "It... It was helpful." He yawned, stretching his free arm. "Well, I'm about to pass out."

Hina nodded. Still worried, she accompanied him out of the kitchen, out of the cafeteria, and into the hall.

"I really wish you'd quit looking at me like that," he said through another spoonful of ice cream. He'd taken the tub with him.

"Ugh! I'm not looking at you any way!" said Hina.

"Relax," he said. "I mean like I'm some sort of pity case."

"Oh," said Hina. Now that they were in the hallway, another dilemma had occurred to her. "I think we have a problem."

"What's that?"

"I… still don't know how I feel about leaving you alone tonight, but I also think it would be inappropriate to stay in the same room together."

He rolled his eyes. "I—"

But he never got the chance to finish because he was interrupted by the faint sound of static.

"What was that?" asked Hina, on high alert.

They heard the noise again. In the silence, it seemed infinitely louder.

"What the…" Leon muttered to himself.

The noise came one more time.

*Grn... Grrrrrn... Grrrn...*
Hina frowned, brow furrowed in concentration. "It sounds like its coming from the bathhouse."

Leon's gaze was fixed intent on the entrance to the bathhouse. "Behind me," he said to her, voice more commanding than she was used to hearing, waving an arm as if to motion to her to, well, get behind him.

She scowled. "I can take care of myself." But the noises did kind of freak her out. "I mean… I'm super scared right now," she muttered, much more quietly, "but I still can take care of myself."

"I know," he said, eyes still fixed on the bathhouse. "But if it attacks me first then what the hell."

She didn't like the sound of that, but, still, she stood behind him as he slowly edged toward the bathhouse.

Grnnn… Grn… Grrrrnnn…

"Hello?" he asked as they crept inside. They both knew that asking 'hello' to the dark and scary noises in the night was never a good idea, but Hina was fresh out of ideas. "Hello? Is anybody in there?"

The noise came once more, this time from the row of lockers behind them. The pair whirled around and to their amazement, saw a glowing green light and what looked to be a small figure, hovering in the air. Ghostly green lights did not belong in school bathrooms, even in schools as weird as this.

And maybe it was the sleep deprivation, or sickly glow of the light, or the fact that it was dark and late and they were already on edge, but when they saw that figure, glowing green in the dark, they screamed and ran from the bathhouse as fast as they could, all previous arguments or discussion of rooming situations completely forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

Also don't worry this is NOT meant to be shippy, Hina is still super gay and Leon is in a mourning period. Anyway, hope you enjoyed some depressed wlw/mlm solidarity

The reason for all the malasada talk is b/c Hina mentions them in her love of donuts during this chapter, like ONCE, and I really like malasadas so anyone who hasn't tried them you're missing out. I doubt the school would have any, but a girl can dream, right?

(.... my interpretation of Leon is way more charitable than he probably deserves)

I try not to deviate from Mukuro's pov, but if i enjoy doing these, I might make intermissions more frequent
Chapter 3.1: Thanks, I Hate It!

Chapter Summary

Time to explore the new floor! Oh this should be so interesting, especially because we can all assume everyone reading this has probably watched/played the game at least once and already knows the layout of the school at least vaguely.

But, hey, there are pictures!

Chapter Notes

lol i swear I will be responsible and do one last check for mistakes. I swear. It will happen.

P.S. Couldn't get the pictures to embed, i tried everything so you can just see them at the bottom of the page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Today's count kinda sucks, huh?" Hiro looked around the cafeteria with a dejected sigh. "Toko and Byakuya are still choosing to skip out, and…"

He didn't finish the sentence, letting it hang in the empty air. But we all knew what he meant. The others missing from our table. The ones who weren't just absent.

Usually a man in cheerful spirits, even Hiro looked crestfallen.

But Toko and Byakuya weren't the only ones missing.

Chihiro frowned, brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Hold on. Where are Hina and Leon?"

"I went to check on them first thing in the morning!" said Taka. "I figured I ought to see how Leon was feeling, considering…" Once again, the last night's events were left unsaid—remembered by the whole group like some kind of collective nightmarish fever dream.

"And, how's he doing?" asked Mondo.

"Hmm… I'm not sure!" said Taka. "I didn't go inside. They said they weren't feeling well, so I let them be. I insisted perhaps attending breakfast as a group could help improve their mood and morale, but, if they're sick then they must attend to their health."

"What, both of them?" asked Junko. Her expression was dubious.

"Strange…" said Celeste. "Hina seems to be an individual who is usually in good health."

Taka nodded. "Yes!" he said, replying to Junko. "Perhaps a stomach bug is going around."
"So, what? We're just supposed to leave them?" asked Junko. "I don't know about what Taka said about leaving them. How about you, 'Kuro, you think that's a good idea?"

"I—" floundered a bit, feeling put on the spot. Nor did I want to start a fight with Junko. I could see her point, but I didn't want anyone else sick.

"No, let them be," said Kyoko.

I nodded to her, she nodded back. I was thankful for her diverting the attention, and speaking so I didn't have to.

"I think it's best if we let them be," said Taka. "And I recommend everyone exercise caution and good hygiene, lest it spread. Taking care of oneself is important! Especially now…"

"That is very true," I said. I turned to Taka. "Thank you for checking on them."

He seemed surprised by my thanks. "It is no trouble!" he said. "Considering our—our circumstances, I thought it a smart decision, and I figured someone should do it. And I am the earliest to rise, after all."

Junko rolled her eyes. "Humblebrag."

"Hmm… While we're on the subject," said Chihiro. "Do you think it's a good idea to leave Leon by himself?" she asked with an expression of worry.

"Nah, don't worry, he's got Hina," said Mondo, leaving it short and… well, not sweet. Just short.

"I don't know…" said Chihiro. "Mukuro, what do you think?"

"Why is she asking me?"

After all, I wasn't the one who had checked up on him. Why did my opinion hold any weight?

Luckily, before I had to respond, Taka answered for me.

"Hina is keeping an eye on him," said Taka. "But she did inform me that he is feeling somewhat better after a night's rest!"

"They've been in the same room, all night?" asked Junko.

"I—I didn't ask," said Taka, frowning to himself as if the thought hadn't occurred to him.

"See?" muttered Junko, under her breath. "What did I say? Less than a day, and he's already moved on. Shocker." She rolled her eyes.

Hiro grimaced. "Ew, gross. Don't even joke like that."

"Anyway, I doubt it's a problem. I don't think he's her type," said Celeste, with a small self-satisfied smirk.

I was surprised at the group's behavior. Apparently, Chihiro was, too, because she spoke up.

"Guys! He's grieving!" said Chihiro, tone surprisingly harsh in her amazement, despite that fact that she seemed to be keeping her voice hush for no real reason. "I can't believe you would talk like that."

Junko snickered. "Cheer up, Cheerio. It's a joke."
"Alright, are we done messing around?" said Kyoko, waiting for the others to calm their silent laughs behind their hands. "We actually do have some important decisions to make."

"Like?" asked Junko.

"How we're going to conduct ourselves from now on," said Kyoko.

"Mukuro?" Chihiro turned to me, as did the others. "What do you think we should do?"

Everyone's eyes were on me.

Oh, no.

Why was I becoming the decision-maker? Did they honestly expect me to lead?

That was far too much responsibility. I'd never been one for the spotlight. I needed out—as soon as possible.

"I—" What we did from this point hung on my next few words. "I would like to finish my breakfast before we have to make any major decisions. We can't talk on an empty stomach." I was stalling, but what the hell? "But, Kyoko is right, we do have to start thinking about our future. That includes planning any sort of resistance or escape."

Perhaps I could defer attention to someone else.

"If Makoto were here, he would know what to do..." said Chihiro, gaze diverted sadly at the floor as she hung her head.

"Hey, now," said Hiro, "Things will turn around. Besides, I've made a decision. As the oldest here, I've decided I'm gonna step up as team leader!"

As much as I adored Hiro, that didn't sound like the ideal plan, so I decided to speak up.

"That is very responsible of you, Hiro."

"Heh, thanks 'Kuro!"

I needed to think fast.

"And," I said hastily, "on the positive side of things, in your position as the new leader, I think you will do an excellent job of delegating your responsibilities. For instance…"

A moment of inspiration struck me.

"—Taka is very responsible and always punctual, I think if you were to put him in charge of our schedule, starting with this morning that would be an excellent decision as a leader."

I put on my best encouraging smile.

"Hey… Hey, you know what? You're right!" said Hiro. He turned to Taka, calling out to him. "Taka, you like this sort of thing, what do you think?"

Taka looked surprised, eyes going wide as he pointed to himself. "Me?"

"Now that sounds like an idea!" said Mondo, giving his bro and encouraging smile and a nudge in the arm—perhaps more roughly than intended, but Taka smiled back in response. "Bro, you got
"Sure, why not?" said Hiro. "What's today looking like?"

I breathed a sigh of relief, glad I seemed to have actually succeeded to charm someone once in my life.

While I was sure Hiro wanted to be nice and do the right thing by stepping up, I had a feeling it was more out of obligation than anything. Well, he had zero problems with letting other people make the decisions.

Junko glanced at me, raising an eyebrow. "Well, look at you," she said, too low for anyone else to hear, her tone impressed. She smirked, her look knowing, as if to say, I see what you did there. "What?" I asked, trying to play innocent despite the fact that I did indeed know what.

In the corner, I noticed Kyoko biting her lip, fighting back a small smile.

Junko watched Hiro and Taka in conversation in amazement. "Wow," she said. "It's like the real life version of rolling a nat 20 in persuasion."

At this comment, Celeste raised her eyebrows. "Interesting..." she said, expression still as impassive as ever. But even then, I spotted a twinkle of amusement in her eye.

I shook my head, rolling my eyes. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing. Hell," said Junko. "We're all bummed out of our minds from yesterday, I think we could use a laugh. I mean, I question your choice, Taka isn't the sharpest tool in the shed. But he is kind of a stick in the mud, so he'll get a kick out of it. What's the worst that could happen?"

I ignored that last comment, instead clearing my throat, catching the attention of the two boys. "I'm hungry," I said, trying to make a conscious effort to convey just how hungry I was. "So, what have you guys decided on?"

"We are going to finish our breakfast!" said Taka. "And then we are going to split up in groups and devote some time to exploring the new floor."

"Oh, right!" said Junko. "Good call. I forgot that was a thing."

"New floor? Well, at least something positive has come from our misfortune," said Celeste with a pleased smile.

"You think so? I just don't think we should be celebrating something like this," said Chihiro.

"It's not a celebration. However, I am not going to turn my nose up at the idea of additional accommodations," said Celeste. "If we are stuck here, I would rather live comfortably. Besides, if we adapt to our living situation, our level of dissatisfaction will go down and perhaps we will be able to coexist peacefully. And, in the end, isn't that all what we want?"

God, that smile of hers never got any less creepy.

"And you'd really be ok with staying here f-forever?" asked Chihiro.

"Well, of course I want out. I am stuck here, just like everyone else," said Celeste. "However, I have come to accept the fact that we may be staying here for a very long time. Yes, perhaps that may be forever. Really, the sooner you are at peace with that fact, the easier your life will be."
"Well said! Anywhere can be a home if it's where you're happy!" said Hiro. He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Not here, though. Having a hard time being happy here. This place is kind of a downer."

"I'm gonna make coffee," said Junko, cutting in—noticeing the downturn the conversation was taking. "Let me know if you guys want anything."

That got everyone clamoring for breakfast suggestions, previous somber mood all but forgotten as Junko headed to the kitchen to brew a fresh pot.

—

"Taka." I murmured his name under my breath to catch his attention, pulling up a chair next to him as I sat my cereal down in front of me.

"Mukuro!"

He nearly jumped back in fright, almost spilling the contents of his cup in the process. The others glanced up at the noise, my attempt at subtlety wasted.

"Sorry," I said, still keeping my voice low, despite the fact that we'd managed to attract several pairs of eyes from the others students. Still, after a moment, they seemed to find our discussion to be unimportant and mundane, and went back to their food.

"It's quite alright," said Taka at a normal volume, still trying to regulate his breath. Well, a normal volume for him. "You just startled me."

"I wanted to thank you for stepping up today," I said.

"Oh!" said Taka. His brow furrowed in confusion. "And I appreciate your thanks very much, but Hiro is the one in charge, not me. Perhaps you would like to talk to him instead?" He nodded earnestly.

"I'm not talking about that," I said. "Well… I am a little." How was I going to put this delicately? "I really like Hiro a lot. And I know he's the oldest, but I think you've displayed some real leadership qualities. I think… I would be more comfortable if… if you could step up into a position of authority."

"Do you really believe that?" asked Taka. "I—I am flattered by your praise. And thank you for acknowledging my attention to detail and skill at organization, but I have heard the others express doubts about my abilities—"

Of course. Junko. And the others to some extent, but she was the main culprit here.

"—given my lack of talent. And it—it has come to my recent attention that I can be loud, and—and pushy. Perhaps you could find someone with a more commanding presence, such as Kyoko, or Mondo. Mondo I'm certain would do great—"

"Mondo is wonderful," I agreed, partially to get on Taka's good side, and partially honest. I did like the guy, flaws and all. But he wasn't always the most level-headed person. The real intent was to appeal to Taka's fondness for him. "But I think we both know that he has a small problem controlling his temper."

And Kyoko was… Kyoko. Something told me that she would not go for the idea of being in charge.
"I—I still don’t know—"

"Don't be ridiculous!" I said, getting more insistent. "You would do a great job. I know you can be responsible. And I know how hard you work."

I was laying it on thick, just a little, but I meant it. If anything I just didn't want to be in charge myself. I really didn't feel ideal for the position of leadership. Taka, on the other hand, I had much more confidence in his abilities in this field than mine. I was never leader material.

"Besides," I added, "I didn't check on the others this morning. Hiro didn't check on the others this morning. You did that. That was your first instinct. The fact that you care enough about everyone's safety and well-being proves to me that out of everyone here, this is your job."

He seemed to be giving it some thought. "You are correct. I do work hard," said Taka. "This is true."

I bit back a small smile, fighting the urge to vocalize that humility was also one of his most admirable qualities. In the end, I thought better of it.

"I…” Taka looked at a loss for words. "You are incredibly kind, but I am afraid I cannot replace Makoto! He was our leader, and it would do him a disservice to try and replace him so quickly!"

"Nobody can replace Makoto," I reassured him with a nod. "He was… very special. But I think he would feel a lot better knowing our group is in the right hands. That's you. You're the one who knows what you're doing. Just… don't tell Hiro I said that," I added, much more quietly.

"I won't!" said Taka, much to loud for someone swearing not to share a private confidence. His eyes began to well up, and although I had come to expect this sort of reaction with Taka, I was still surprised to see tears begin to stream down his face as he smiled and nodded at me. "I won't say a word! I—I will not let you down! I promise I will put in all my effort, and do the best that I can do! Thank you for believing in me!"

Not knowing how to respond, I reached out, patting him awkwardly on the back. "You'll be great."

"Thank you for trusting me with this great responsibility," he said, and for once his voice was at the volume a voice should normally rest. "I always felt that I had trouble breaking into the group, but now I know you respect me."

Taka beamed. His smile was so wide and happy as he wiped at his eyes with his sleeve.

I fought back the pang of guilt in my stomach, trying to reason with myself that it was for the best. I'd meant everything I'd said to him. Mostly.

None of it was a lie. I just… maybe possibly hadn't said it all for the most altruistic reasons. I didn't think he would be a perfect leader—to expect that was a fool's hope. But he'd proven himself to me. And I definitely felt more comfortable with him making major decisions than someone like Hiro—or even me. That's what it was all about in the end, wasn't it? I just didn't want to be the one calling the shots. Being in charge? I could never do something like that.

Finally, Taka had collected himself to give a final sniff, then do a sweep around the dining hall with his eyes. "Well, I'm nearly done with my breakfast, so as soon as everyone finishes up we should probably get going. I'm assuming this is everyone?"

Our meal was interrupted by a sickening familiar sing-song voice.

"I'm here!" the voice trilled. "You called for me so I appear!"
Of course, to our amazement and horror, it was Sparkling Justice in the flesh.

At catching our attention, Jill struck a pose. "Morning darlings, it's me! Sparkling—"

Hiro yelped, jumping back in fright and shielding his face and looking ready to hide behind the table if need be. "Gah! What are you doing here? Stay back!"

_So much for our courageous leader._

"Oh my." Celeste looked between them, cutting into the conversation by addressing Jill. "Pardon me, but I think my friends and I were expecting… someone else this morning," said Celeste. She was quick to do damage control. Didn't want to get on the serial killer's bad side, that's for sure. I could tell she was trying to put it tactfully, but even she seemed surprised at the intrusion.

"What? Gloomy? Don't you worry your adorable little heads off, she'll be back. All in due time, all in due time." Jill nodded sagely, as if she was the reasonable one in this situation. "Just not right now. I've been dormant for far too long, I decided it was finally time. I need some fresh air!"

"Well, good luck with that," grumbled Junko. "We're trapped inside."

Jill ignored her. "Isn't it just your lucky day? Normally I'd never allow myself out in public like this, but since a certain blonde-haired bespectacled someone let the cat of the bag, I figured I could catch myself a break. It's what I deserve, isn't it? Besides, my battle has just begun!"

"Battle?" asked Taka.

"That whole 'killer with a split personality' thing is so overdone. I'm breaking down barriers, destroying that stereotype!" said Jill.

"But, you are a serial killer with a split personality..." said Hiro.

"True, but I'm going for nuance. _Layers._"

"You mean like an onion?" he asked.

"I was thinking more like a wedding cake. Besides, my side of the story has gone untold for far too long! Plus, I'm awful curious to see who exactly this mastermind is gonna be!" said Jill, wiggling her fingers and cackling with excitement.

"To kill him or to take him out for coffee?" asked Junko.

"I think I'll decide when the time comes," said Jill. "But if you must know, I think I'm leaning toward the former. It'd be so much more satisfying!"

Celeste sighed. "Be it far from my greatest wish to ruffle any feathers, but the idea of rooming in the same dorm with a serial killer is unsettling to say the least."

"Please," said Jill. "I'm harmless! I wouldn't hurt a fly. Unless that fly happened to have a violent criminal background, of course."

And no one wanted to argue the point any further, so we were forced to finish our breakfast with a murderer.

Well, technically _we'd been_ having breakfast with murders. We just didn't know it. They were… future murderers. Potential murderers. Murderers-to-be.
We'd just never had breakfast with a killer with a past. So that was an interesting new first. The lingering thought of having to live with this new wild card didn't exactly make my stomach settle. At last, we finished up our meal before heading out to search the school.

—

"You'd think... in a place... like this... they'd be smart and install some elevators," said Junko, pausing at the top of the steps—hands on her hips as she tried to catch her breath.

I followed her up the steps, not far behind. "I mean, you're not wrong, but I don't—don't think it was the top priority for whoever designed a school for mutual killing," I replied, also a little winded, even if I was trying to hide it.

Finally reaching the third floor, I paused behind her, scanning the hall all over in order to take in our new environment.

"Believe me, when we get out of here I'm definitely going to be talking to someone about the accessibility of this floor plan," said Taka, coming up from behind us. "It's abysmal!"

"You mean if we get out of here," said Junko. More quietly, she added, trying to remain out of earshot from the others. "And don't start with that, or Celeste will never shut up with her screed on 'adaptability'."

Taka frowned. "Darwinism was never meant to be applied to humans."

"Sure. Once we find out who our mystery warden is, you can tell that to the mastermind," said Junko. "I'm sure he'd get a kick out of it." Looking around the space, she added, "So this is the third floor, huh?"

"Guess so," I said.

A door with a circular window caught my eye—being the first thing of interest on this new floor. Craning my neck to see what was inside, I was greeted by the inside of what looked to be a rec room.

"This way," I said, waving to Junko.

She nodded, a few of the others following.

The room was dark, covered in a wallpaper of blue dots with a large pool table as the centerpiece. In front of the pool table, a stack of different strategy and board games lay on a small coffee table set up. In the far corner a dart board was propped against the wall. To the right, a shelf of magazines in a large variety.

"I've never seen anything like this in a school before," said Taka with wide-mouthed awe. "Have you, Mondo?"

Mondo shook his head.

I was unsurprised, since I also had never attended a school with this level of resources.

"Neither have I," said Kyoko.

"The perks of going to a school for freaks, I guess," said Junko. At seeing everyone's expression, she amended, "'Scuse me. I mean, a school for the 'Ultimates'."
"Not bad," said Hiro, giving the room a look around before nodding, seemingly impressed. His gaze fell on the stack of games. "Alright, alright. I mean, check this place out. Pool table, dart board, games. Not bad for a school, yeah? Hey, Mukuro." He turned to look at me, something of a glint in his eye—noticeably in much higher spirits than he had been that morning. "Ever played Othello?"

"Haven't had the pleasure." I reciprocated the smile, the feeling more natural than I had come to expect. "Guess you're gonna have to show me sometime."

He winked. "Sure thing. What about poker?"
I shook my head. "Nope."
"Looks like I have a pupil," said Hiro. "Now's as good as any time to learn, yeah?"

Before I could reply again, I was distracted by the shelf of bottles on the wall catching my attention. Each one contained a small Monokuma, each holding a different chess piece.

"Oh! A Monokuma in a bottle," said Chihiro, noticing where my attention was diverted. I hadn't even noticed her enter the room. "Like those bottles that hold ships."

I nodded absentmindedly.

"These accommodations will certainly make life here more pleasant," said Celeste with a small pleased smile.

"I suppose you're right," said Taka, but he frowned. "Somehow, it… feels wrong to enjoy this leisure under these circumstances."

"We have so little to enjoy, let's just try to take it for what it is," said Kyoko. "Even if the means by which our new floor was obtained probably ruins the feeling of enjoyment for most."

Junko sighed. "Let's… call it a way to boost morale," she bargained, but even she didn't sound convinced. "Happy people don't kill their classmates."

"Ha!" Jill cackled, surprising Junko. Her eyes widened as she gasped. "Hey, check this thing out!" She pointed to a dusty locker against the right wall, running up to it and swinging it wide open.

"That old thing?" asked Junko. "What's the big deal? It's just a locker."

"Are you kidding? You could hide a dead body in this thing!" said Jill with a wide grin and climbing inside.

Begrudged I was to admit it, she was sort of right. It was definitely large enough to fit a person, at least of Toko's size.

At seeing the look on everyone's faces, Jill added, "Relax, I'm not getting any ideas. Can't a serial killer make a joke around here?"

She then proceeded to close the locker on herself.

Celeste ignored her, flipping through one of the many magazines she'd picked up off the shelf. She frowned. "I have this edition. Surely there must be something newer, right?"

A familiar squeaky voice came from behind us. "Well, lookie here! So I see you guys found my—"

"Let me guess, Monoshelf?" asked Junko, voice full of sarcasm.
"Don't be ridiculous!" Monokuma waved a paw. "That's just a regular old magazine shelf! We've got fashion, motorcycles, martial arts, video games, baseball, science, the works!"

"Any hope of getting new issues as they come out?" asked Celeste.

"Sorry," said Monokuma, shaking his head. "I'm afraid no can do! You see, magazines at the moment… well, they are kinda…"

"Kinda... what?" asked Junko, eyebrow quirked in either curiosity or disbelief.

"Oops!" He covered his mouth. "That's wandering dangerously close to spoiler territory!" said Monokuma. "Besides, I think our higher power gets tired of me spouting exposition when we should already know everything by this point!" He waddled over to the locker where Jill was stuffed inside, giving it a good hard kick.

A yelp came from inside, and I noticed Kyoko's eyes narrow, watching the locker intently.

"Higher power?" asked Hiro. "You don't mean like—"

At that precise moment, the locker swung open and and a faint Jill went falling to the ground. Or, she would have hit the ground if Kyoko hadn't grabbed her just in time, just narrowly missing the connection with the cold tile.

"I—w—what happened?" she asked, and to my surprise, it wasn't Jill's high pitched trill but Toko's hesitant stutter.

"Toko!" said Chihiro in surprise.

"Whoa!" cried Mondo. "Shit, you're back!"

I rushed to her side, putting her arm over my shoulder and trying to help her on her feet. "Are you alright?"

She was heavier than I expected, so I shot Junko a look. She seemed to get the message, because nodded and was at Toko's other side at once, and the three of us helped her to her feet.

"Hang on, 'Kuro," said Hiro. "Stay back! It could be Jill playing a trick on us!"

"Or just a person with alters switching their personality," said Junko, ignoring his warnings.

"Wh-Where am I?" asked Toko. "Last thing I r-r-remember I—" She stopped, frozen in her tracks. "I —I'm not dead?" She was as white as a sheet, eyes wide as she felt herself on her face, her arms, pinched her legs, as if she couldn't believe this was real.

"It would seem that way, yes," said Kyoko with a small reassuring smile.

"Unless, could it be? Maybe we're all dead," said Hiro. "And this is just a simulation."

"Not helping," said Junko. "Also, which is it? Are we dead, or is it a simulation? I don't think it can be both."

"So I di—I di—I didn't d-d-do it?" asked Toko.

"No. Not you," said Kyoko.

Toko breathed a sigh of relief, even smiling for once for just a moment before she had another
realization, frowning in puzzlement once more. "B-But then who—"

"Maybe we can talk about this later," said Chihiro. "What's important right now is that you're okay."

"W-Why are you being so—so nice—so nice to me?" asked Toko, eyeing everyone with suspicion. "Get away from me!" She backed off, shrugging me and Kyoko off her. "G-Get off! What are you hiding?"

"Sayaka's dead," said Junko flatly, ignoring Chihiro's evasiveness and just getting right to it.

"Junko!" said Taka sharply.

"What?" asked Junko. "She was gonna find out anyway, there are only so many of us in this school." She turned back to Toko, addressing her once more. "Sayaka was the culprit. She was the one who killed Makoto. Not you."

Even just hearing the words out loud was hard. I shook my head, but deciding to let it go for now. She had a point, even if I felt there were more delicate ways of putting it.

"You mean..." asked Toko.

"It's true," I said, my voice quiet. "Sayaka, she's..."

I could feel myself getting choked up, so I said nothing.

"What?" asked Toko. "You—You can't be serious. This—This h-has to be some sort of j-joke, right? Why would sh-sh-sh-she ever do something like that? Don't—Don't lie to me! I—I don't l-like it when you guys gang up on me like—like this!"

"God, you are so frustrating! Why would we lie about this? I swear, the second you come back, and you're already acting like this. I'm not sure I don't prefer the serial killer," grumbled Junko.

Toko stood there in silence. For a moment, I thought she was going to cry.

Then, she bolted for the door.

"Fine then!" She took off before any of us could stop her. "I'll just leave!"

We all stood there, dumbfounded.

"Oh, dear," I murmured. "Excuse me," I said with a sigh, following Toko out the door. I had no idea what I was aiming for, but I figured I ought to do something.

"Toko?" I called out to her, not seeing her anywhere in the third floor halls.

I wandered up and down the corridors, coming up empty. As far as I could tell, she wasn't anywhere in the halls, so I checked the first door I saw. To my relief Toko was inside, sitting on a stool right in front of an easel. I was so relieved, it took me a second before I realized we must've been in some sort of art studio.

"It's nice in here," I said, trying to make polite conversation.

Her head snapped around to face me, head spinning so fast her braids whirled around and slapped her in the face.

I bit back a laugh, trying to hide it behind my hand.
Toko scowled. "Don't laugh!" she said. "W-w-what are y-you doing here? Go away, I don't—d-don't want t-to see you."

"I'm sorry, Toko," I said, but I was still trying to hide my smile. I don't think I managed.

"No," she said, turning away from me. "I don't w-want your apology. G-G-Go—a—aw—awa—just leave. W-Why are you even here?"

I ignored her questions, taking the room in. "This place has everything, huh?"

There were easels, statues scattered sporadically throughout the room, paints, tools, tables, art pieces plastered up all across the back wall—everything you could expect for an art room and possibly more.

"I imagine you'd make good use of the stuff in here."

She shot me a questioning look.

"You know," I added, "for your art. You are a fan artist, right?"

She just shook her head. "Go away," she said. "What p-part of 'leave' don't—don't you understand? Everyone hates me."

"That's not true."

"It is! I'm sure y-you all w-wish—wish your p-precious Sayaka was—was here instead of me. Then everyone would b-be happy."

"Trust me," I said. "Even if Sayaka… even if she was still here, I doubt any of us would be really happy."

It was preposterous to even think of any sort of true happiness while we were trapped like this. Sure, there were days that were less horrible. There were people who could make the experience all the more bearable. The the ever present crushing despair seemed to hover over us like a dark cloud.

My tone was bitter, annoyed at her notion, but I could still feel myself getting choked up. Even though time had passed, I didn't want to talk about Sayaka. I just wanted to put it from my mind. The memory of her, of everything. Whether it be her happiness or her suffering. I wanted it gone from my mind. It would be so much easier to just forget.

But Makoto… poor Makoto, he had sworn to keep the memory of every lost person with him in his heart. And he was no longer here, so that just made me more certain that I had to do the same. I would do it. I would treasure all of them, even if it sometimes felt impossible. For Makoto.

"Everyone knows my—my s-secret now," said Toko. "There's no—n-no way—no way everyone c-can just be… be cool with it! No way we c-can g-g—go back to n-nor—normal!"

I sighed. "We're… prioritizing. With everything else going on, I think Sparkling Justice is the lesser of two evils."

To my right stood a life-sized statue of Monokuma. I grimaced. It was an accurate likeness, which made me despise the thing even more.

_Who would make a statue like this?_

I sighed.
Toko sniffed. "Thanks," she said, although by this point I was more focused on the statue than I was on her. She seemed to notice my attention was diverted because she also shifted her gaze to the statue.

"It's…" she began, and by her tone I could tell she was searching to be generous, but was at a loss for words.

"Hideous," I said, finishing her sentence for her.

She giggled.

"Do you r-really think it's so bad?" she asked. "The c-craftsmanship is—is actually quite good."

I nodded. "I hate it," I admitted, my frankness and disgust getting the better of me. But it felt good to be so openly vitriolic for a change. There was a smug aura about it that seemed to mock us. I'd had enough. I turned to Toko. "Would it be considered sacrilege to destroy it? It is art after all."

"I would c-counter argue that w-while it—is art, d-despite our revulsion, destroying it w-would c-count as—as an—as an eq—equally valid form of s-self expression," said Toko.

When I merely shot her a quizzical look in reply, she explained.

"Performance art."

"Ah." I didn't pretend to understand it, but I accepted the conclusion nonetheless.

"If you d-don't want t-to be direct, it c-could always… have a little accident," suggested Toko, an expression I'd never seen on her face before as there was something akin to mischief in her eyes. "An uns-suspecting student dips into the r-room for some—some much needed p-privacy. Much to her ch-chagrin, she just—just so happens to b-bump into one of th-the displays, sending the piece c-crashing to the ground." As she said this, Toko swung her arm haphazardly, knocking the statue right over, just as she'd been talking about—only I was pretty sure this was not on purpose.

I shot my arms out, catching it with both hands. My lip twitched in a small amused smile. "I swear I've seen that anime," I said, humoring her, just a little. "I don't know, I think I'd still feel bad."

"N-No one would have to know," said Toko.

A tantalizing offer indeed.

I examined the statue for a moment before handing it back to her. It was much heavier in my arms than I'd anticipated, and did not want to hold onto it.

"I'd know," I said. I smiled wryly. "Oh, what the hell. Go for it."

Toko's grin was sheepish. "Oh, I was just—just kidding," she said. "I'd never d-done anything like that before."

She placed the statue back on its platform, but it must have been unsteady because it wobbled just a moment before teetering over to the ground once more, and this time, I didn't have the reflexes to catch it.

The statue hit the floor with a crash, shattering into tiny pieces.

It seems fate had made our decision for us.
For a moment, neither of us spoke. Toko glanced at the mess at the floor, then back at me, eyes wide. Like she was scared of getting into trouble.

I was the first to break the silence.

"Oh no," I said, completely deadpan, without the even the barest trace of sadness in my voice. "That's just tooooo bad."

It took her a second to digest my reaction.

Then, she laughed. Actually laughed.

"Oops," she said, hiding the shortling grin behind her hand.

"Yeah," I said, joining in with her laughter. "Oops."

It was strange seeing her smile, but not unwelcome. And it was a great improvement over the depressing mood from only moments ago.

"I'll sweep up," I said once our laughter had finally subsided.

"Oh, no!" said Toko. "Y-You r-really don't have to—"

"It's no trouble," I said, already heading for the door in the back, hoping it would maybe be a supply closet. "There's got to be a broom here somewhere."

I opened the door, expecting a dusty closet and instead finding a large room stocked with every kind of art supply you could imagine—paints, chalks, papers, pencils, pens, chisels, canvases so big they reached the ceiling, even a wall covered with mallets of all sizes.

"I—I insist," said Toko, following me into the room. "It was m-my—my fault, I should—"

She stopped mid sentence, eyes wide once she saw the room for the first time. "Wow… This place really does have everything!"

I smiled, her excitement infectious. Spotting a broom hidden away in the corner, I pushed aside some of the larger canvases out of the way in order to grab it; however, in the process I accidentally knocked over a nearby teetering pile of old sketchbooks.

"Shit."

I knelt down, scrambling to pick up the sketchbooks that were scattered all over the floor.

Toko noticed my mess. "Ha," she said with a shaky laugh. "G-Glad to know I'm not th-the only clumsy one here." She bent over, picking up a sketchbook that had fallen open, flipping a few pages out of curiosity even though they were all crumpled from the fall. She frowned.

"What's wrong?"

She pointed to one of the pictures, a sketch of some cartoon figure I didn't recognize. I didn't understand what the problem was until took a closer look, realizing she wasn't actually pointing to the drawing but instead pointing at the markings just below it.

"Th-Th-Th-That—That's my signature," said Toko, glancing up at me with an expression of apprehension.
I didn't say anything. I wished I knew what it meant, but I was just as lost as her.

She flipped the page. Once again, a drawing, this time in color, and at the bottom the same signature in the corner. The next page, another drawing, another signature. And another. And another. Each page was the same.

The next page was not a cartoon figure, or a character from an anime. Rather, on the page were some familiar faces, smiling and posing. It was a tribute to Toko's talent that they were so recognizable, but I'd recognize that strawberry blonde hair anywhere.

There were two pieces, both in color, one of Junko and Celeste smiling with each other. The other was of Junko… and myself, posing as if for a photograph.

A real likeness. Not photorealistic, but so evocative of the real thing that the resemblance was unmistakable. Distinctly her style, yet she'd definitely managed to capture Junko's carefree spirit. Even Celeste looked to be agreeable, as if she was enjoying the company. But for some reason, I wasn't smiling.

At the bottom right corner, there was a note:

"Thanks so much, Toko! Xoxo - Junko"

We looked at each other.

"What—What does it m-mean?" asked Toko.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Sh—Should we t-tell the others?" asked Toko.

I paused. "It's… your call," I said. After all, it was her signature in the corner. It was her art, not mine.

Usually, I felt alright about sharing our findings with the other, but this filled me with a sense of dread and uncertainty. What would the others think? Would they start to suspect us? Would they really be wrong to do so?

Toko gulped. "G-Give me a little time," she said. "I'll know by—by later."

I nodded, biting my lip. "Okay…"

Still, I couldn't suppress the lingering sense of dread already beginning to form in the pit of my stomach.

—

I tried to shake off that sense of dread as I continued my day, but the feeling persisted.

"Where have you been?" asked Junko once Toko and I were back in the hall.

"Oh!" said Toko. "We—We were just—"

I shrugged. "Out." Voice lower, I added, "I'll explain later."

She nodded.
Behind us, another voice that had been absent thus far said, "Well, this is bleak."

"Leon!"

We turned around to see him standing at the top of the stairway.

Chihiro ran up to him, giving him a hug. "You're ok!"

"Oof!" Leon grunted at Chihiro's surprising force, but smiled weakly. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks, Chihiro."

"Leon?" asked Toko. "W-What are you—"

"I thought you were sick," said Junko, eyeing him with suspicion.

"What? I had a stomach ache. That's the funny thing about being sick, isn't it?" said Leon, "Sometimes, people who are sick, you know, get better."

Junko rolled her eyes. "Glad to have you back."

"Heard something about a new floor," said Leon. "Wouldn't miss that for the world, would I?"

"Oh, for sure," said Junko, dryly. "Our classmates may be dropping like flies, but at least we have a pool table, so now we're even stevens."

Leon let out a quiet snort of laughter. He was smiling, but he looked different somehow. Tired. More dishevelled.

"How are you feeling?" asked Chihiro, eyeing him cautiously.

"What? Oh, my stomach is fine," said Leon.

"Oh. That's good to know," said Chihiro. "Actually, what I meant was—"

"How am I?" asked Leon. "You were talking about the other thing."

Chihiro averted her gaze, embarrassed. "Yeah."

Leon smiled at her, this time with much more warmth. "I'm fine. Honest. Don't worry about me."

She nodded. "Ok."

A loud voice boomed from down the hall. "Damn! Get a load of this fucking thing!"

Junko snorted. I, too, was suppressing laughter, hiding it behind my hind.

"Well, let's go," I said. "What are we waiting for?"

Following Mondo's voice, we found the last room at the end of the hall.

Once again, it didn't look like any kind of normal classroom. To the left were green machines covered in buttons and dials. In the back, cabinets full of materials: pulleys, steel plates, magnets, all kinds of stuff I couldn't even recognize.

"This... doesn't look like a classroom," said Leon, gaze gravitating up toward the ceiling in awe.

I was quick to realize why. In the middle of the room stood a giant metal machine, towering over all
of us and about as high as the ceiling. At the top was a globe standing on a pole. The front was covered in what look to be black screens, and all sorts of other parts that I had no idea what for. And it was covered in strange wires.

As I approached it, I realized it was emitting a low, constant whirring noise.

"It looks more like a lab," said Chihiro. "Although I can't imagine students building this thing. Even the ones here."

"What even is this thing?" asked Taka, who was standing right next to Mondo.

"I wouldn't go near that if I were you!" said a familiar squeaky voice.

Looking back down, I noticed Monokuma standing between us and the machine, as if to create a barrier. Strange. I hadn't even seen him approach, but by now that was used to that with him. How he entered and exit the room would continue to be a mystery.

"I thought you were tired of expositing," said Celeste.

"Oh, no!" said Monokuma. "I'm still going strong, it's the powers-that-be that are a little tired of this whole routine. Gets boring, saying the same information over and over. I'm just here to warn you. Time machines are precarious creatures. Best not to mess with them, if I were you."

_Time machine?_

"Haha, very funny. You're joking, right?" said Junko.

I was very much agreeing with Junko on that one. This had to be some sort of practical joke. There was no way time machines were a real thing. Even in a school like this, it seemed impossible. Just another way for Monokuma to mess with us. Besides, even if it did work, I doubt there was any way Monokuma would ever let us near the thing.

Still… A part of me hoped. Perhaps foolishly, but once the thought was in my mind, it was impossible to suppress.

"I'm sorry, a what now?" asked Leon. His demeanor changed in an instant, suddenly alert, insistent. "Then what are we standing around here for? How does it work? We have to save the others! We— We can save—"

"Sorry, I'm afraid no can do," said Monokuma with a cheeky grin.

"I'm not afraid of you," said Leon, standing his ground and much more serious than usual as he got right up in Monokuma's face. "And you're not gonna stop us."

"Careful," warned Kyoko, and she must have noticed like I did that he was coming dangerously close to touching Monokuma. Didn't want anyone else breaking the rules. Especially with the danger of casualties. I didn't know how serious Monokuma was about his threats.

Leon was… Leon, but I didn't want to lose him, too. Not another one.

"It's not really my call," said Monokuma. "I'm afraid that particular machine only goes back one minute in time. It's practically useless."

"What?" asked Leon, stopping as the realization hit him. His posture deflated once more. "So you mean it's…"
Although I didn't show it like him, Leon definitely matched how I felt. I knew it was too good to be true. With Monokuma, there always seemed to be a catch. I'd learn how to brace myself for this kind of disappointment. But Leon didn't take it so well. I watched as all the hope in his eyes seemed to leave him, all previous energy dissipating with it. Even the facade of normalcy he had been putting on when he first arrived was gone—we got to see the real mess. To see his heart break all over again was painful for even myself.

"Actually, that was a joke. It was a pretty good one, no?" Monokuma laughed. "That machine is actually an air purifier."

"Why would we need an air purifier?" asked Taka.

"Why do you think?" said Monokuma. "To give you rascals clean air! It's very powerful, ventilates the whole school. So don't touch it, because if it breaks than it's your necks on the line."

"So... it's not a time machine?" asked Leon.

"Come on, you should know better that!" said Monokuma. "There's no such thing as time machines! You're like one of those people that believe anything someone says. Hey, if you look up, you'll find 'gullible' written on the ceiling."

"That is a very cruel joke," said Chihiro as she scolded Monokuma with surprising disgust. She rushed to Leon's side, as he was looking a little pale and unsteady. "Why would you say that? Just to let us down? He's already been through a lot, can't you see what it's doing to him?"

"What is my purpose, if not to make you suffer?" said Monokuma.

"Yes, drawing out the pain of someone who is still grieving by playing childish and deceitful pranks," said Chihiro. "You're practically a chessmaster."

Monokuma cackled. "You're so eloquent today, Chihiro. Are you finally growing a spine?"

"I think you should leave," said Chihiro, not breaking her composure this whole time. She stood steadfast, I could tell from her expression that she was beginning to doubt herself. I was surprised she hadn't cracked yet.

"Go! We don't want you here," said Junko to Monokuma. "Don't you have a hive to terrorize or something? She said leave."

"Fine!" Monokuma sighed dramatically. "I may be bothersome, but I know when I've overstayed my welcome."

And with that, he disappeared.

Once he was gone, Junko turned to Chihiro and whistled. "Well done. I didn't think you had it in you."

Chihiro bowed her head, blushing slightly and avoiding meeting Junko's eyes. "It's nothing," she mumbled, almost too low to hear. "I just think everyone deserves respect. And you shouldn't lie to people."

Mondo grinned at her. "That was badass."

"You think so?" she asked.
"Yeah! I know not just anyone could stand up to Monokuma like that. You are one tough chick."

"Yeah..." Chihiro nodded, still looking down at the floor. "Yeah."

She looked as if she wanted to say something else, but it never came.

—

"Well, realistically, I suppose it would have been too much to hope for an escape on the third floor of the school," said Junko with a resigned sigh as we all headed down the stairs.

"True," said Kyoko, "But that doesn't mean it was a complete waste of time."

"No? Well, I'm all out of ideas," said Junko. "No way out, and nothing else of note as far as I'm concerned."

"All the same, we should always take the time to know the school. Know the landscape. Know your enemy. That is, if you want to better your chances."

"Also..." said Chihiro. "What Junko is saying may not be entirely accurate. I may have found something important."

"You found something? What is it?" demanded Taka.

"It's probably nothing..." said Chihiro.

"Show us!" said Junko. "Don't you think we oughta see it?"

"Okay, okay," said Chihiro. "Here it is." She pulled something out of her pocket, holding it out to us.

Upon inspection, it looked to be a small pink camera, scuffed around the edges, but you could still make out a small character design on the side.

Toko gasped. "Where did you find that?"

"In the equipment room," said Chihiro. "What's wrong?"

"That's mine!" said Toko. "How did y-you get ahold of it?"

"I told you, I found it in the equipment room," said Chihiro. "I didn't take it, if that's what you're trying to imply."

"G-Give me that!" said Toko, snatching the camera from her hands. "My Mew Mew: Kissy Cutie camera! Someone m-must have removed it from it's b-b-b-box! Look at it!"

She waved it in Chihiro's face.

"It looks fine to me," said Chihiro. "There are still some photos left. You can still use it!"

Toko sighed. "I—I don't know if I want it anymore. It's not in mint condition. It—it's useless to me."

"Well," said Celeste, "if you don't want it anymore, would you mind if I take it? Perhaps I can find some use for it."

"T-Take it, then," said Toko.

Celeste giggled, taking the camera from Toko and pocketing it herself. I couldn't imagine what
Celeste would ever need a camera for, but I didn't say anything.  
"Okay, but that's it?" asked Junko. "That didn't tell us anything."

"I—" began Toko, but she shook her head as if changing her mind.  
"Yes?" asked Junko.  

I watched her, curious to see if Toko was going to bring up what we found in the art room.  
"I—I… I found something, too," she said.

We were down the stairs now, walking through the hallways to return to the dining hall for a group meeting.  

With everyone's eyes on her, Toko, hands shaking, pulled out her sketchbook. "I found this in the art room." She glanced to me, as if unsure if I wanted mention of my involvement.  

I nodded to her, grateful that she waited for my go-ahead. "Actually, we found it. I came across it when I knocked over a stack of sketchbooks in the art supply room."

"What is it?" asked Kyoko.  
"It's—It's…" Toko seemed to shy away under everyone's gaze, looking to me for help.  
"It's an old sketchbook. Of Toko's. See for yourself—if that's alright, of course," I said.  

Toko nodded, flipping it open.  
"But Toko," said Chihiro, taking a look at the pages, "Aren't these just your sketches?"

"But I have no—no memory of—of m-m-making them," said Toko. "A-And…"

She flipped to the page with sketches of Junko, Celeste and I.  
"And there's more," I said.  
"That—that's my signature," said Toko, pointing to the bottom.  
"What does this mean?" asked Celeste.  
"I don't understand," said Taka. "When did you draw this?"

"That's the problem," said Toko. "I—I don't remember."

"But—were you guys friends before?" asked Taka. "Surely, if you had met before you would have said something."

"Thanks so much, Toko'..." Junko paused to read over her note, brow furrowing as she frowned. "What the hell is this?" demanded Junko, looking back up at Toko. "You're not hiding anything, are you, Toko?"

"N-No! This is my—my first time m-meeting all of you!" said Toko. "Believe me! M-My first time —"

"Guys," I said. "Give her some space. She says she doesn't know where the pictures came from."
"And… that's not all," said Toko. "There—There's one more thing." She folding the sketchbook to the very back, and a piece of paper slipped out and into her hand. "I f-f-fou—I found this between the pages."

It was a photograph. But to my surprise, it wasn't a reference for the drawings. In the photo was Sakura, Hifumi, and Makoto, all smiling and happy.

In the photo, Sakura looked like she had a grip on Hifumi's hair, which seemed to please her greatly. Hifumi on the other hand, was sweating bullets, looking extremely uncomfortable despite the fact that he was still smiling. Under Sakura's other arm was Makoto, who was smiling and laughing with the others, looking mostly content to be in Sakura's headlock, as if it was simply a game they were playing at—all in good fun.

Questions started racing through my head, one after the other. Why those three? What were they doing together? Why do they look all smiling and happy? When was this taken? Where was this taken? Who took it? Where… Where was Sayaka?

And in the picture, the window in the classroom… There was no metal plate.

"No fucking way..." said Mondo.

Chihiro gasped. "This has to be fake, right? This can't be real."

"When would they even have the time to take a photo like this?" asked Taka.

"You don't think they all knew each other before, do you?" asked Hiro. "Maybe they're all in on some sort of scam. Maybe we're being punk'd!"

"Whoa, slow down there, Shaggy," said Junko. "If they knew each other, don't you think it'd be something we would have found out?"

"Maybe not!" said Hiro. "Maybe it was something they were keeping from us on purpose!"

"Or, it could be Monokuma playing tricks on us, just like he always does," said Junko.

"Hang on." Leon snatched the picture from Toko's hands, examining it closely.

"Hey! Y-You can't just—" began Toko, but Leon ignored her.

"Where is Sayaka? Why isn't she here?" he asked.

"You ask us like we know any of the answers," said Junko. "Believe me, we're just as lost as you are."

"But you know what this means, right?" he asked. When all he got was mystified looks, he said, "Maybe they're alive somewhere! The others!"

"I don't think so, Leon," said Chihiro. "Hifumi and Makoto were definitely dead when we found their bodies. They were right there."

"Well maybe—"

"I'd love to believe it," said Taka. "But Mukuro did a body examination and everything. It seems pretty conclusive."

"But—"
"She's right, Leon," said Celeste. "And we all saw Sakura executed with our own two eyes."

"Well, fine!" said Leon. "If you want them to be d—dead!"

"Leon!" said Chihiro. "Nobody wants any of them to be—we all wish it weren't true."

"I miss them, too," I said. "But we can't deny the facts. We can't turn away from reality."

For a moment, Leon looked as if he were about to fight. I took a step back, seeing nothing but fury in his eyes. Then, he sighed, crumpling again. "You're right. No, you're right, you're right, I just… I can't take this anymore. I just want to get out of here."

"I know…" I said. "I know. It's hard for me, too."

"Get outta here," said Leon. "You? You don't let anything faze you."

"You're wrong," I said. "I'm far from infallible. But you have to stay strong. We all do. If you want out of here, that's what you have to do."

He nodded. "I'm not going to let myself be weak anymore. I swear," said Leon. "We're going to find whoever did this. And when we do, I'm going to kill the mastermind."

"No! You are not going to do that!" said Chihiro. "If you defy them in any way, you'll die!"

He shrugged. "I want to get out of here. If you don't consider our freedom worth the fight, then fine."

"We shouldn't be taking any risks!" said Taka. "It's too dangerous! I just want everybody to stay safe."

"Safe? Living like this?" asked Leon.

"If you want to survive, you'll learn to lay low," said Kyoko, but Leon wasn't finished.

"Sure we're surviving, but is this living? Being watched 24/7? Never knowing what is gonna happen next? This isn't living. I don't care what it takes."

"Oh hon, for once I totally get your point, but that's the survivor's guilt talking," said Junko. "Or the suicidal ideation."

"Mukuro?" Chihiro turned to me, as did the others. "What do you think we should do?"

Everyone's eyes were on me.

_Oh, no._

"I—" Once again, people were deferring to me for decisions I wanted no part in. Still, my words here were very important. "I think we should wait. Taka's right. We need numbers. We're stronger that way."

"Let's go back to the cafeteria," said Kyoko. "We'll talk more once we're there."

Meeting Kyoko's eyes, I nodded slightly.

Walking into the cafeteria, I saw a familiar figure sitting at one of the tables with a box of donuts.

"Hina!" I said in surprise.
My voice was immediately drowned out by the others as they rushed into the dining hall. Everyone rushed past me and crowded around Hina.

"Oh, hi guys," said Hina. Being surrounded by everyone like that, Hina looked really uncomfortable.

"I thought you were feeling sick," said Kyoko.

"Oh! I was. But I was getting kinda hungry, so I ate, and now I feel a little better."

"I was under the impression you had a stomach bug," said Celeste. "At least, that is what Leon had. I assume you came down with the same thing."

"Uh… Yeah! I went down to the nurse's office to see if they had anything for it, but—"

"The nurse's office?" asked Taka. "But isn't that place closed?"

"It is. Or, well, it was," said Hina. "But there wasn't really anything there. Not even protein or vitamin supplements. Just headache meds and over-the-counter stuff."

"Are you sure there was nothing in there at all that could help you with your stomach ache?" asked Chihiro.

"Of course, I'm sure!" said Hina.

"So instead you went to get something to eat," said Celeste, dubious expression on her face.

"Well… My stomach ache made me hungry, so I…"

"Hmm.. I see," said Celeste, but the look she was giving Hina indicated she did not plan on dropping it.

"Nevermind it!" said Hina impatiently. "How did the investigation go? Did you guys find anything?"

"We found several things, now that you mention it," said Mondo. "Turns out, a way outta here was not one o' them."

"Yeah, no dice," said Junko, "God forbid we find anything useful. But yay for us, Toko has her sketchbook back, now she can draw all the fursonas she pleases to her heart's content, so that's good."

"I don't d-d-draw fursonas!" screeched Toko.

"And I think you're willfully skating over the teensy detail that we found a drawing of you inside," said Leon.

"Of Junko?" asked Hina.

"Well, of a couple different classmates," said Celeste. "Myself included. And the photo."

"What photo?" asked Hina.

"There's a photo of our… dead classmates that we found in the equipment room behind the physics lab," said Junko. "At least, that's where Toko claimed to have found it."

"Why are you saying it like that?" asked Toko. "I'm not h-h-hiding anything!"
“Everything just seems… too convenient,” said Celeste. "Those pictures must be a forgery from Monokuma. It's the only explanation.”

"A-And you think—you think I had something to do with it?” asked Toko.

"You're the one who found everything,” said Junko. "How do we know Monokuma didn't give them to you for a reason?"

"Wh-What are you suggesting?" asked Toko. "T-That I'm so—some sort of t-t-traitor? You'd like that, wouldn't you? I bet you'd be so—so satisfied to—to c-c-confirm your suspicions about me."

"That's enough,” I said. "That's not fair. Junko, I knocked over the pile of sketchbooks. I was with her when we found Toko's drawings. I had just enough to do with it as her. So if you want to blame her, then you have to blame me, too.”

Junko opened her mouth, looking as if she was about to say something when Hiro interrupted.

"Nevermind that!” he said impatiently. "I dunno about you, but I'm much more interested in hearing what Hina has been up to all morning, yeah?"

“Yes, I'm rather curious to hear about it myself actually,” said Celeste with a smile.

The others all turned to look at Hina.

Nobody else caught it, but as everyone's attention was diverted away, I could have sworn I caught Hiro wink at me.

I nodded ever so slightly in return, saying nothing, but internally grateful he'd gotten me out of the crosshairs, at least for the moment.

"I—what are you talking about?" asked Hina. "There's nothing to tell. I told you, I was sick!"

"Uh-huh," said Junko, eyebrow quirked in a skeptical expression. "Sure."

"Hina,” said Taka. "I'd love to believe you, but I must say that your story has been rather inconsistent. This doesn't mean you're in trouble, I just think for the sake of transparency, it might be best if you told the rest of us what is going on."

Hiro gasped, eyes going wide. "You don't think she's working with the mastermind, do you? Yeah, maybe she's the traitor! Or maybe she knows a secret way out of here—or, or or—"

"Gosh!” said Hina. "It's none of those things, Hiro. I can't believe you would say something like that. You and your conspiracy theories, I swear."

"That's exactly something a mastermind's accomplice would say!” said Hiro, pointing an accusatory finger at her.

"For heaven's sake!” said Hina. "I overslept. I was just a little... tired and shaken from last night is all."

"F-From last night?” asked Toko.

"Ha, gotcha talking!” said Hiro.

Hina scowled, stamping her foot and seeming to curse herself for a moment before she took a deep breath. "Look, if I tell you what's really going on, will you please stop bugging me?”
Hiro grinned in a way that was almost disarming. "Sure thing, boss."

"You guys promise you won't laugh?" asked Hina.

"Promise," I said, jumping in before anyone had a chance to interject with any snide comments.

"I..." She took another deep breath. "I saw a ghost."

For a moment, no one said anything. Then, Junko snorted.

"You swore you wouldn't laugh!" said Hina crossly, clearly wounded.

"Yeah, and you swore you'd tell the truth," said Junko. "Guess we're all breaking promises today."

"It is the truth!" said Hina.

"And we did it, kids!" said Junko. "Looks like Monokuma finally did it. Hina is the first one to lose it in this place. Congrats on being the first to officially start seeing things. I would've put money on Hiro, but I didn't want to enable his gambling addiction."

"Hey!" said Hiro. "It's not an addiction, it's a hobby!"

"Besides," said Leon. "She's telling the truth... I saw the ghost, too."

Chihiro gasped. "You did?"

"You did?" asked Junko, the exact same question sounding much more scathing and skeptical coming from her.

He nodded. "Last night. I couldn't sleep... We were in the cafeteria, and—"

Celeste shook her head. "And you ignored the rule for Night Time."

Leon shot her a look, annoyed at being interrupted. "Yes, and I'll admit we probably shouldn't have done that, but after everything I was feeling like shit. I just needed to get out. Hina and I were talking when we heard a noise coming from the bathhouse."

"So we went to investigate," said Hina, following up. "It was in the dressing room. One of the lockers was half-open, so we checked inside."

"And?" asked Hiro, as if hanging onto their every word.

"And... we saw a human figure, surrounded by a glowing green light."

"A human figure?" asked Kyoko. "Who?"

"I—I don't know!" said Hina. "I was so frightened, I didn't get a good look! We just ran, both of us!"

"Well, I mean..." said Leon.

"Don't try to salvage your ego!" Hina snapped. "You were just as scared as I was, admit it!"

"Now way!" said Hiro. "A gh-gh-ghost?"

He was sweating, looking severely shaken and he seemed to be chanting something to himself, possibly a prayer.
"Get outta here," said Junko, shaking her head. "Get outta here! There's no way it was a real ghost. It's gotta be something else."

"Y-Yeah!" said Mondo, but something in his expression looked shaken as well. "You can't be serious, Hina."

"There must be some sort of logical explanation…" Taka frowned. "There always is for this sort of thing."

"I think it's real," said Celeste, but there was a mischievous twinkle in her eye that I did not trust.

"Y-You do?" asked Hiro. "H-Hang on, Celeste, is that part of your ultimate talent?"

"Oh, yes," said Celeste, amused smile hidden behind her hand, but she nodded as she tried to look stern for him. "And this spirit it telling me it's the soul of someone you cheated out of house and home coming to take revenge."

"Leave him alone, Celeste," said Kyoko, her tone a warning.

"Come on, Hina, you can't expect us to believe this crap," said Mondo. "What? You know how chicks are."

"So believing in ghosts is gendered, now?" asked Junko.

"No!" said Mondo. "That's not what I—look, all I meant was that… I dunno, chicks are more in-tune to that kind of stuff. They're more... sensitive about it."

Junko shook her head. "Not much better."

"Hey!" said Leon. "I'm right here! I saw it, too!"

"I—I'm sure you g-guys were just—just—just tired is all!" said Toko.

"That's possible," said Taka. "Many supposed paranormal encounters were just the result of weak mental state."

"Well… Even if it's not physically real," mused Chihiro. "I think we should acknowledge that the emotional distress it's caused these two is real enough for them to miss out on half a day of activity. We—We should go check out whatever this—this thing they found is. Ghost or no ghost…"

"I agree," I said, glad Chihiro was finally speaking her mind.

"Me, too," said Kyoko.

Chihiro smiled a small smile. "Oh, but someone else can go first though… I—I don't believe in ghosts, but I don't want to take that chance."

Junko looked to me. "Mukuro?"

I laughed wryly, certain that if Junko hadn't asked me first, I was going to be pressured into the job either way. I didn't have a choice. "Way ahead of ya, sis."

I turned to Hina, taking a deep breath. "Okay. Show us your ghost."

Chapter End Notes
Sorry, no ghost. I have to maintain suspense somehow, right?

I have a feeling ch 3.2 is gonna be long but I'm fine with that. Ngl, I had so much fun writing the last chapter/intermission, this one was kinda tough for me. Idk if you can tell, I've been getting kinda tired of repeating stuff from the game. I could always just find ways to skip it, so I suppose the happy medium was deciding to switch it up a little.

Also, I almost forgot, since next chapter is free time chapter, absolutely let me know who you want Mukuro to talk to! I'm definitely picking some for myself, but if someone is suggested enough times I do tend to throw them in, too. Gotta keep u guys on ur toes ;)

P.S. you can vote for Jill OR Toko or both! I don't care either way, I freely admit I can just find some contrived excuse for her to switch if need be, but they count as two different people for free times, jsyk

Also, if I can't figure out how to get the pictures to work I'll just put them here. I don't claim to be, like, Ultimate Fan Artist like Toko but these were fun to make, regardless:

Junko and Celeste: https://imgur.com/a/7V5eXD6
Junko and Mukuro: https://imgur.com/a/E584c4V
Sakura, Makoto, and Hifumi: https://imgur.com/a/3jbybG4
Chapter 3.2: Joker is Poker with a "J"

Chapter Summary

It's free time! Which means time for Alter Ego, secrets, meaningful talks, and Hiro being -80% of Mukuro's impulse control

Chapter Notes

Wow, that was surprisingly fast. I'm sure the tradeoff will be that ch 3.3 takes a crazy long time.

If I enjoyed writing a chapter that can almost guarantee the next one will be a nightmare

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hang on," said Hina, taking a deep breath. She stopped in the hall outside the bath house, turning to look at all of us, holding her hands up as if to say 'wait'. "So if I show you guys what we saw, you have to promise me not to freak out, ok?"

We all nodded.

"Ok." Eyes still flitting between everyone in apprehension, she entered the locker room. We followed suit. "It was over there," said Hina, pointing to the middle lockers, in the row against the back wall.

But there was nothing there. At least, nothing remarkable.

"Uh… where?" asked Mondo.

Hina frowned. "It was… It was right there, I swear! By the locker!"

"J-Just forget it," said Toko. "There's nothing there."

Leon sighed. "Maybe they're right, Hina," he said, turning to look at her. "Maybe we were just tired, and we got carried away."

Hina stamped her foot. "Fine, don't back me up here, but I know what I saw!"

"Hang on," I said, something catching my eye—something about the lockers.

They were all closed, save for one.

Dead center, one locker was just barely cracked open.

"This one," I said, pointing to it. "Is this where you saw it?"

Hina nodded. "Y-Yeah, but—"
I approached the locker slowly, putting a hand to it. It swung open with an eerie creak.

"Wow, good eye, 'Kuro!'" said Hiro, from a few steps behind Hina, no doubt wanting to keep his distance.

I nodded, allowing for a small smile at him before turning back to see what was inside, everyone else craning their necks to see over my shoulder.

"That—that's not a ghost..." said Chihiro, voice so low it was if she was whispering to herself.

"That's—"

"A laptop," said Kyoko. "Yes."

"Is it just me, or does it looks familiar to anyone else?" asked Junko.

"No, I see it, too," said Kyoko. "It... looks like the same laptop that was in the library."

"Yeah, but wasn't that computer broken, last time we saw it?" asked Junko.

Only half paying attention to her, I swiped at the mousepad with my finger.

Before she could say any more, the light on the laptop flickered on, emitting a low green light—as if it had heard her and wanted to specifically prove her wrong.

"Say... Hina," said Celeste. "You said you saw a green light, yes?"

"Well... Yes, but—"

"Surely you did not mistake the light of the monitor for a ghost?"

She glared. "Hey! It was dark, and it was late, and we didn't know what we were gonna see! How was I supposed to know it was a laptop? Have any of you ever seen a laptop in a bath house before?"

"I'm surprised you are able to dress yourself in the morning," mused Celeste.

"Ok, look," said Leon. "It's not that unbelievable. It was the dead of night, alright? It wasn't just the laptop, we really did see a figure."

"Just a second ago, you were doubting that the ghost even existed," said Junko.

"Well, I don't know!" he said. "I'm just telling you what happened!"

"It's fine," said Kyoko. I could tell her patience was getting short. "But this laptop is here, so what are we going to do about it?"

"Guys," said Taka. "I don't think it is the best idea to go poking around like this. We don't even know who the owner of this laptop is."

"Well," said Kyoko, "I think we do know one person who has the capabilities to fix a broken lap, don't you?"

"Still, I don't know if we should—"

I looked at the screen, my curiosity getting the better of me. "All these icons..." I didn't know where to start.
"Oh!" said Chihiro, sneaking up from behind my shoulder and catching me by surprise. "That one right there." She pointed to the top left of the screen. "It says, 'Alter Ego'."

Perhaps, despite my better judgement, I double-clicked on the icon, and the screen without warning went dark.

Then, a voice spoke to us, low and monotone. "Welcome back, master."

"'Master'?” asked Junko, somewhere between confusion, disgust, and delight. "What the fuck is going on?"

Mondo whistled under his breath. "Fuck. Are you kidding? Someone was actually able to fix that old dinosaur in the library?"

Byakuya's face appeared, taking up the entire display with his typical stern expression.

"So it is Byakuya's," said Kyoko.

"Alter ego, huh?” asked Chihiro. "Literally, 'another self.'" She was mystified, but her eyes were bright with curiosity and amazement. "What is this thing?"

"Stop that!" said Taka. "We can't just invade Byakuya's privacy like this. It's his property!"

"Come on, Mr. Pedantic." Junko smacked him in the shoulder. "If you love technicalities, I think we'll be fine. It's the school's property, anyway. Does that make you feel any better?"

"Yeah, Taka, breathe a little," said Leon.

He still looked hesitant. "I…"

I ignored his worries and began to type the first question that came to my head:

"What are you?"

Instead of answering directly, the computer replied in a question:

"Who are you? Identify yourself. If you do not identify yourself, I shall begin lockdown. If you persist any further I will set off the alarm sequence to go off in 90 seconds."

Junko grimaced. "Pleasant, isn't he?"

"He's Byakuya," said Leon. "What do you expect?"

In the corner, I noticed a countdown of 90 seconds.

"Say something!" said Hiro.

"Okay, okay!" I said. I hurried to type my response, mentally praying this would work.

"My name is Mukuro Ikusaba. I am a student at Hope's Peak Academy, and a classmate of Byakuya's."

I pressed enter, and we waited with baited breath as Alter Ego took the time to process my response. The countdown stopped. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

"Noted. I have located 'Mukuro Ikusaba' in my files under 'classmate'. Welcome, Mukuro Ikusaba."
Has my master given you permission for usage?"

"Uhhh…"

"Just say yes," said Kyoko under her breath, inadvertently scratching her nose—probably to hide her mouth.

Smart.

I didn’t know whether that webcam at the top of the computer was working, but clearly Kyoko did not want to take the chance.

"We’ll explain later," she said.

I typed in my response.

"Hmph. Understood. Welcome, Mukuro Ikusaba. I must ask, where is young master Togami?"

"He's currently occupied."

"I see," said Alter Ego, looking about as pensive as it was possible for a computer to look. "Is he in danger? Immediate danger, I should clarify."

"No."

"That is a relief to hear. It has been a while since I have seen him, so I was beginning to worry. Particularly since he has informed me about the specifics of your… situation. It appears to be very grave indeed."

"This is amazing!" said Chihiro. "Wow… A real functioning AI system. I mean, I've seen prototypes, but I've never seen anything like it before. He even recognized us."

"Yeah, and nearly got us caught," muttered Junko.

"Still, using context clues, he was able to piece together that we weren't Byakuya. A learning computer."

"He?" asked Junko.

"Y—Yeah," said Chihiro, sounding a little defensive. "AI this advanced can have memories, have thoughts, and 'grow up'. The process isn't much different from how humans work."

"You sure know a lot about computers," said Junko, eyeing her suspiciously.

"I wouldn't say 'a lot'..." said Chihiro. "I know some basic coding. Besides, I had some spare time."

"A second personality that can never forget or grow old," said Celeste. "So it really is his 'alter ego'."

"But why would he leave it in here?" asked Hina. "I mean, anyone could've stumbled across it."

"Just like you and Leon did, yes?" asked Celeste.

"Yeah, that—that's what I mean… Doesn't it seem weird to just leave something in here?"

Which… I did see what she was talking about, but there was something special about this room that the others might not have noticed yet.
"He must've seen it, too," I said. "This room. It's different."

"You noticed it, too?" asked Kyoko.

"Noticed what?" asked Junko.

"Thus far, this bath house is the only place in the school without security cameras," said Kyoko. "Which means—"

"Which means this is the only room where Alter Ego would've been out of the mastermind's sight," I said. "Right?"

"Exactly," said Kyoko. Her eyes met mine. "May I see it for a moment? I have a few questions."

"Oh, uh, s-sure—" I said, but Kyoko didn't wait for an answer, taking my place in front of keyboard.

"Thank you." She nodded to me.

"How much do you know about what's going on?"

"Hello, Kyoko Kirigiri." Alter Ego paused. "Yes, you are also stored under my files as 'classmate'. That will suffice. I am certain that my master has been as thorough as the situation has allowed. Given the time and limitations placed on him. He was planning to tell me more, but I do have the general idea. How… How many students are left?"

"10."

"I see. We are running out of time."

Kyoko shot out another question.

"Why are you here?"

"Are you asking about my purpose? Well… Master has planned for me to analyze the massive number of files stored on this laptop. I believe the files are related to the school, but the protection on them is surprisingly strong. It will require more time than planned."

He paused again.

"Master is very smart, and wishes to use all means available to learn as much as he can about the current situation. He surmised that since the files were so well protected, they must be important."

Toko giggled. "It—It calls Byakuya 'master'."

Hina groaned. "Ugh, Toko. Please don't tell me you're gonna be weird about this."

She had an alarming smile on her face. "It's like th—there's t-two of him, now."

Junko rolled her eyes. "Two Byakuyas. Oh, joy."

Kyoko ignored them.

"How long until everything is unlocked?"

"I'm not sure," said Alter Ego. "It could be a while."

"So, that's why he installed Alter Ego?" asked Chihiro. "Because he knew how long it would take to
analyze the files, and wanted someone else to be able to do it while he was away?"

"Smart," said Celeste. "It means that his work remains uninterrupted."

"Even if something… were to happen to him," said Junko. "Huh. Credit where credit is due, that beanpole knows what he's doing."

Kyoko began typing again.

"Keep it up. But be careful not to let the mastermind notice you."

"You don't need to worry," said Alter Ego. "Everything is under control. I already have a back-up plan in case of emergencies. And as a last resort, my built-in webcam allows me to see what is going on, so if anybody suspicious shows up, my alarm is programmed to go off."

"That… is all fine and good during the day, but I'm afraid nighttime is a concern," said Celeste. When she received quizzical looks, she added, "Have you forgotten? Our rooms are soundproof. If something were to happen to Alter Ego, we wouldn't be able to hear it even if we wanted to."

"Is it… our problem, anyway?" asked Hina. "I mean, maybe we should just let Byakuya deal with it."

"Of course it's our p-p-problem!" said Toko. "W-We can't just leave Alter Ego here to f-fend for himself!"

"Oh fuck," said Junko. "Are you kidding me? Are you already becoming attached to this… this machine?"

"N-No!"

"God, this really is a dream come true for you isn't it? An obedient representation of your dream guy, who won't call you names because he's dependent on our help for knowledge, and also he just so happens to not be real."


"Why?" asked Junko. "It's Byakuya's computer, why do we have to do anything?"

"Yeah," said Hina. "I mean, shouldn't we just trust him to take care of it?"

"Say that sentence again," said Leon. "Really hear yourself this time. Do the words 'Byakuya' and 'trust', really go together?"

"But it doesn't belong to us!" said Taka. "We can't just take it!"

"Whoa, hold on, bro. Nobody said we were taking it," said Mondo.

"Then what do you suggest we do about it?" asked Taka.

Another voice, one we hadn't heard all day, spoke from behind us.

"We are not going to do anything about it."

All of us whirled around to see Byakuya standing in the doorway. Several of us cried out in surprise.

"Byakuya!" cried Toko. "Y-You're here!"
"As are you," he said. "Clearly. Always somewhere you shouldn't be."

"Christ, man!" said Hiro, clutching at his chest. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Byakuya rolled his eyes. "Like I said, we are not going to do anything about it because it is none of anyone's business."

He approached Kyoko, who was still standing at the computer, but she didn't budge.

"Like hell it's nobody's business!" said Leon. "Your computer scared the crap out of us."

"Yeah, if you didn't want anybody to find it, you shouldn't have left it here out in the open," said Hina. "We found it here last night. It really scared me."

"I'm sure that would've been a sight," said Byakuya. "But the rest of you. I see you've found my Alter Ego."

"Yeah, we did," said Junko, eyeing him suspiciously. "What's that about, anyway?"

"Like I said," said Byakuya, his tone even more forceful than usual. "It is none of your concern."

"But," said Chihiro, "if it has to do with the school, or possible escape, then I think we have a right to know. It's school property, it doesn't just belong to you."

For a moment, Byakuya said nothing, instead just staring at Chihiro with an intense, unreadable expression. Then he sighed.

"Fine. I assure you, if there are any developments, I will be sure to let everyone know, but for the time being, do not—I repeat, do not—under any circumstances, interfere with my work."

"Have you considered that we might actually be able to help you?" asked Chihiro.

"I have considered it, and the foregone conclusion is that most of you would be at best a well-intentioned nuisance," said Byakuya. "Trust me, you are more a hindrance than a help to me. Just stay out of my way."

"B-Byakuya," said Toko. "Are you s-sure you don't—"

"Yes, that includes you," said Byakuya. "Your stench overwhelms the room, making it impossible to think."

We all stood there in silence. When nobody moved, he added:

"Well? Get out. Leave me alone."

We all shuffled out of the locker room, leaving him standing there by himself, but before we'd gone he called out to us one last time.

"And I promise you, next person to touch Alter Ego without my permission loses a hand!"

Once outside the bath house, we all turned to look at one another.

"Well, that was weird…" said Hina. "But at least it wasn't totally for nothing, right? I mean, I did find something there, didn't I?"

And as if he had been waiting for his cue…
"Dun da-da duuun! Hina has gained enough experience to level up!" Monokuma grinned at us. "So what was this awesome something?"

"Monokuma!" said Hina.

"You all seem in remarkably good spirits. Did something happen?"

"No, no, n-n-nothing like that!" said Toko, way too hastily. "Why would y-you ask us that?"

"Oh, keeping secrets from your headmaster?" said Monokuma. "No fair, I demand and exclusive interview!"

"You know, just because you demand something doesn't mean we have to do it!" said Hina, glaring at him.

"Do it?" asked Monokuma. "Do you mean like, 'do it', do it?"

"Hey, cut it out!" said Hina, going red. "That's disgusting!"

"Don't talk to her like that!" said Taka. "This is an abuse of authority!"

"Yeah, leave her alone!" said Leon.

"Aw, you're so defensive," said Monokuma, practically gushing with delight. "It's adorable! Is something blossoming there?"

"I told you to stop," said Leon through grit teeth. "Talk to Hina like that again, and I turn you inside out."

"Oh, is that a threat?" asked Monokuma.

"A promise."

"Oh, such a tough guy. I'm blushing." Monokuma sighed. "Fine, I suppose I could always go in there and find out for myself." He turned to the bath house.

"No!" several of the others cried out in unison, putting their hands up.

"And why not?" he asked.

"B-Because!" said Chihiro. "It would be... inappropriate!"

"Besides." Celeste smiled. "If you must know what we were up to, we were just having a discussion about going into the bath house. We haven't had a chance to relax in some time. But unfortunately, the bath house is not divided into men and women sections. So we decided to do rock-paper-scissors to decide who would go first. Hina won the match, and that is why we are all so pleased."

I was impressed by her quick thinking. Give it to Celeste to never show a sign of weakness. I'd been suspicious of her, but maybe she really was on our side this whole time. She did not hesitate coming up with a ruse, and her poker face didn't even flinch.

"Haha, yeah," Hiro laughed, quick to play along. "Well, a deal's a deal. That's too bad, guess we're gonna have to wait, right Hina?"

"I… Y-Yeah, that's right!" said Hina, quickly catching on. "That's right. That's exactly what happened. Speaking of which…" Her tone was a command, giving them a forceful look. "Boys,
don't you think it's time to head back to the dining hall?"

"Ah, jeez, what're ya gonna do, right? We lost, fair and square!" Hiro's voice remained a little too loud, but otherwise he was a pretty good team player.

"Guess we gotta wait," said Mondo.

"Yes!" Taka nodded, eyes going wide. "That is right! We shall be going now!"

He was much too stiff, but thankfully, he was generally stiff anyway, so there wasn't too much of a difference. And he hadn't cracked.

"Wait!" called Chihiro, and the boys stopped in their tracks before they could really leave. "Can I go with you guys? I changed my mind. I don't really want to take a bath."

"What's wrong, Chihiro?" asked Mondo.

"I—I'm not really in the mood for a bath," said Chihiro. She looked to the girls. "Why don't you go on ahead?"

"Oh, Chihiro, no!" said Hina. "You should come with!"

Chihiro shook her head. "I'm telling you, maybe some other time, I—"

"If you really want," I said, "the boys can go first instead, and we can take a rain check. We wouldn't mind."

If truth be told, I was feeling apprehensive about the whole thing.

"Mukuro!" said Junko, scoffing at me in indignance.

"That's not necessary!" squeaked Chihiro. "Really, it's ok."

"See? She said it's fine. Come on, 'Kuro," said Junko, grabbing my hand and dragging me along before I could say anything else. Curiosity mixed with sympathy, at seeing Chihiro's down expression, I waved to the boys and to Chihiro as we returned to the bath house.

"Now who's gonna explain to Byakuya that he needs to leave or else Monokuma will know what's up?" whispered Junko to me.

"Uh…" The idea didn't appeal to me, so I said, "Rock-paper-scissors?"

"Best two out of three?" said Junko.

"Deal."

—

"Mmm… That was such a good idea," said Hina, closing her eyes and running her fingers through her dripping wet hair as she grabbed a nearby towel to dry it off.

"Yes, it was," said Celeste, following her into the dressing room, towel wrapped around her head and content smile on her face. "Getting a chance to stretch out and relax after all this time was a true pleasure."

"Wow, Hina, I didn't realize your hair was so long," said Junko. "I'm so jealous."
"I know, right?" said Hina, letting her still damp hair down from out of the towel. It was true, when it wasn't up in her usual ponytail, it fell all the way down to her waist. "It doesn't look it, though. I just don't know what I'm going to do. It's like it has a mind of its own." She sighed. "Maybe I'll just cut it all off."

"What, why?" asked Junko.

"It just gets in the way, you know? I'd love to be able to just not think about it."

Toko snorted.

"What? It's true," said Hina. She frowned. "I probably won't, though. It'd probably just look ugly on me."

"What's wrong with short hair?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing!" said Hina. "I meant on me. I didn't mean anything by—"

"I think you should do it," said Celeste.

"What, really?" asked Hina.

"Yes. I think it would flatter you quite nicely."

I was distracted by the conversation the other girls were having, so I was surprised to hear Kyoko address me.

"Mukuro, can you hand me my belt?"

I turned at the sound of her voice to see her half-dressed putting her pants back on. She was reaching for her shirt, so all she had on top was her sports bra. With her back facing me, I could see all the lean muscle that was usually hidden behind layers of clothing.

"Mukuro?" she asked, looking to me again.

"Oh, sorry!" I said, putting a hand up to shield my eyes. "I didn't mean—"

"No, it's ok. Don't worry about it. My belt, though?"

"W-What? I—"

"Please?" she said, glancing at me from over her shoulder. The look she was giving me was expectant. She pointed. "It's over on the bench."

"Oh, uh, ok…"

Just as promised, the black belt sat on the far end of the bench. I reached over and grabbed it.

Kyoko smiled at me. "Yes, right over there."

I handed it to her, unable to ignore the feeling of our fingers brushing up against each other. I tried not to think about how she must've felt, with her hands touching my rough scars. It didn't even matter, anyway.

Our eyes met, and she smiled at me from over her shoulder. I avoided her gaze after that, eyes fixed down at my hands. As far as I remembered, this was the first time any of my classmates had seen me
with my gloves off. With a finger, I traced the scars all over my hands, trying suppress the feeling of shame. They were like memories burned into my skin. For some reason, I didn't want Kyoko to see them—they were markers of my inexperience and carelessness, back when I was a much younger detective.

In fact, I was pretty sure this was the first time either of us had seen each other like this—without gloves, obviously. Catching a look at her left hand, I could see for the first time, a large tattoo in the shape of a dog. Or maybe it was a wolf. I didn't have the heart to ask.

It was amazing. For an Ultimate Soldier, I didn't see a single battle scar.

She must've caught me staring, because our eyes met again, only this time she quickly turned away, grabbing her shirt and quickly shrugging it on. I turned away as well, face burning, and I prayed I wasn't as red as I felt.

"Thank you," she said, and when I snuck a glance at her I could see she was still not looking at me.

"You're welcome," I murmured, still blushing as I sat down on the bench.

"Mukuro, why are you still in your towel?" said Junko. "You're not even dressed yet."

"Huh?" I asked, even though I was not really listening.

"Hello? Well, hurry up," said Junko. "The girls were just saying they wanted to head to the cafeteria for a bite."

"Oh! R-Right. Yeah, of course. Be right there."

I hadn't even noticed the other girls had gotten dressed in that time.

"Alright," said Junko. "Well, hurry up, then. We'll meet you there."

I nodded, allowing the rest of the girls to go on ahead. I dressed myself in my daze, smiling to myself, last of all grabbing my shoes before heading out the door.

"You guys are still here?"

I heard Junko's voice as I entered the dining hall.

Taka looked up at the sound of people entering the room. "Oh, is it that time already? We must've been caught in conversation."

"Actually, Junko, we were just talking about you," said Leon in response.

Most of the boys were all sitting together at one of the tables.

"I'm honored," she said with a grimace. "Please tell me you kept it PG."

"Actually, we were debating whether you'd melt once exposed to water, but it looks like you survived just fine," said Leon.

"Ha ha," said Junko, rolling her eyes. "Actually, I don't melt, I multiply. And I'm not allowed to eat after midnight either. Bath house is all yours, by the way. Glad to see you're back to your usual insufferable self."

"Let's go!" said Taka, standing up and getting Leon to his feet, ushering him out the door before
things could escalate any further. "A fresh bath symbolizes a clean soul and a clean slate."

"You didn't waste all the hot water, did you?" asked Leon, winking back at us as Taka shooed him out of the cafeteria, the rest of the boys following suit.

"Idiot," muttered Junko, before shaking her head and looking around at the rest of us.

"He certainly is an idiot, I'll give him that," said Celeste, hiding a smile behind her hand.

"You say that like it's a good thing," said Junko.

"It can be. Not so much fun for pleasant conversation, but they're much easier to boss around that way," said Celeste.

Junko snorted, nodding with an impressed smirk. "Oh, I like you."

"But besides that, all I mean is that he aims high," said Celeste.

Junko rolled her eyes. "You flatter me."

"You think he was flirting?" asked Hina. "I mean, he seemed kinda shaken up this morning."

"Why, are you jealous, Hina?" asked Junko.

"No!" said Hina. "Not at all!"

"Ooh, defensive. Listen, he's a boy," said Junko. "He's fickle and stupid. Trust me, Hina, they're all like that."

"Hmm... Still a D-rank," said Celeste. "But I can see potential to move up to a C. Although I'm probably being generous."

"Hang on," said Hina. "You rank the boys you meet?"

"I rank everyone I meet," said Celeste. "But the boys especially."

"Hang on!" A squeaky voice piped up from behind us. "Something is strange here… Very strange!"

We all turned around to see Monokuma standing in front of us, giddy with delight. Something was up.

"Ugh," said Hina. "Can't you ever take the hint? You should know by now when you're not wanted."

"Oh, you wound me, Hina!" said Monokuma, clutching at his stuffed chest where a heart ought to be.

"And we were just starting to relax for a change," said Celeste.

"Surely, after seeing how happy we were, an evil little monster like you could never let that last for long," said Kyoko.

"You're all so horrible to me!" said Monokuma. "What I was trying to say is… what's strange is, this is the perfect chance for you guys to sneak a peek!"

"I think I might hurl," said Junko. "I do not want to be having this discussion with you."
"Come on," said Monokuma. "Try to tell me it's not a fantasy of yours."

"Yeah, some fantasy," I said dryly.

"God, you creep!" said Hina.

"Hard pass," said Kyoko.

"Unlike you, we respect the need for boundaries and privacy," said Celeste. "Sorry, but we're going to have to say no."

"B-Besides," said Toko, "Isn't this sort of f-fan—fan service-y moment usually aimed toward the s-straight male audience?"

"Hey, the boys already had their shot!" said Monokuma. At seeing the looks on our faces, he added, "Oh, don't look so shocked, they turned it down because they are so b-o-r-i-n-g, boring! But I figured the offer still stands. It's equality! Besides, maybe there's some sort of easter egg or cheat code that will allow you to sneak past without getting caught."


Monokuma sighed. "I see. I can't even begin to describe my bitter disappointment. That primo fan service coulda been yours… Oh well, guess I'll just have to start preparing your next motive to make myself feel better."

And on that ominous note, he slunk back into the shadows. Leave it to Monokuma to always kill a mood.

"God," said Junko, rubbing her temples. "What a nightmare."

"I know," said Hina. "I can't believe he would do something like that. How awful!"

"Still," said Junko, "You do have to wonder what goes on in there, don't you?" She bit the nail of her thumb, eyes looking to the cafeteria doors.

"Junko!" said Hina. "After chewing him out like that? Don't tell me you're considering it."

"Relax," she said. "Lighten up a little. I'm allowed to have an imagination, aren't I?"

"A dirty mind is a terrible thing to waste," said Celeste.

Toko sighed.

"What?" said Junko. "You can spend as much time as you want pretending you're into cartoons or whatever, but we all know you want the real thing same as any of us."

"I just assumed you weren't into any of the guys here," I said.

"Oh, no, you're right about that," said Junko. "They're all asocial freaks who have zero idea how to talk to a woman, but… I'm allowed a little bit of shallow indulgence."

"Yeah, but Leon?" asked Hina. "Really?"

"If we're talking purely in hypotheticals," said Kyoko. "At least Byakuya is tall."

Junko snorted.
I rolled my eyes. "Ok, whatever."

Was it worth admitting that I didn't find the proposal enticing in the slightest? I just felt bad about the whole thing. It felt wrong—like an invasion of privacy… or something. And I felt kind of funny talking about it. These guys—they were my friends.

And I think… I was finally starting to see myself.

"You are such a hypocrite," said Junko.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"Come on, don't think I don't see you cozying up to Hiro," said Junko.

"Hiro?" asked Celeste, tutting and shaking her head. "Mukuro, have you no shame?"

Even Hina looked to be trying not to laugh.

"I'm not cozying up to anybody!" I said. "Besides, he's like… a grown up."

The thought hadn't even crossed my mind until then.

"Uh-huh," said Junko. "Keep telling yourself that. But nothing gets past me."

"Clearly," I said, completely deadpan. "You don't miss a thing..."

It was easier to just play along than to try and argue.

There was too much—too much to unpack. How do you tell your dear sister that you're not like her? That the thought of spending a bath with your girl friends fills you with dread for reasons you can't place, but an entire evening waiting for two of the the most ridiculously athletic boys to sweat it out in the sauna doesn't even faze you? And you've seen enough dead bodies for a lifetime, but so much as accidentally catching a look at Kyoko with her shirt off sends a shiver down your spine? How do you explain this to her?

You can't.

—

"Do you have any… threes?" asked Hiro.

I scowled, handing over the card. One more, and I would have had a suit.

"Aw, what's with the face?" he asked, a little too smug for my liking as he took the card from me. "You know, if we had enough people for a game of poker, you'd probably have a little more fun."

"Let's see… Who did we already ask?" I counted them all off on my fingers as I listed them. "Junko: 'over my dead body.' Hina: roped Leon into her morning jog, so he's out, too. Taka: believes gambling to be 'morally bankrupt', his words not mine. Mondo: working out. Kyoko: I don't know where the hell she runs off to."

"What about Byakuya?" asked Hiro.

I gave him a look. "Are you really asking me that question?"

Hiro shivered. "Ok, ok, I get your point."
"Hmm… So that leaves… Toko, Celeste, and Chihiro."

He grimaced, as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. "Is that really it?"

"Well, I bet we could've gotten Junko to join if you hadn't scared her off by rattling on and on about mothman. So whose fault is it, really?"

"Hey, mothman is real! If she doesn't want to believe then—" said Hiro, but he backed off under the look I was giving. "Ok, ok. How about we make a deal? Whoever loses this game has to be the one to invite them."

"That's not fair!" I said. "You're only saying that because you're already winning."

"You never know what could happen," said Hiro. "Besides, I can finally show you how to play poker."

"You're just too scared to ask them yourself."

"Hey!" said Hiro, pointing a finger at me. "I resent that! How dare you say things about me that are completely true."

I snorted, shaking my head as I looked down at my sorry hand. "I just don't get it. You are so lucky. I've even memorized your cards. How have you managed to beat me every time?"

"Luck doesn't have anything to do with it," said Hiro, once again smirking at me.

"Oh?" I quirked an eyebrow, itching to know more.

We went back to our game.

A minute or so passed before I finally asked the question.

"So, if it's not luck, then what is it?" I asked.

"What?"

"What's your game?"

"Game?" he asked.

"Your strategy. What I mean is, how do you do it? Win."

"Mukuro!" He mock gasped, accompanied by the dramatic clutching-of-the-pearls gesture. "I am shocked! A magician never reveals his secrets," said Hiro. He clicked his tongue in disapproval. "You should know that by now."

I shrugged. "Ok. Fine. Don't tell me." I went back to my hand of cards.

He shot me a quizzical look. "Wait. You really—"

"No, no," I said, still not looking up at him. I was trying to play it cavalier. "I was prying, you're right. It's none of my business. You got any jacks?"

"Go fish," he said, but he was still giving me a funny look.

"I mean, you have to maintain your mystique somehow... I just I think a lot of people get the wrong
impression about you."

"Uh-huh. And what impression is that?"

I shook my head, drawing a card. "Nah. Nevermind."

_Jack. Matching set._

Looking down at the pile, I noticed there was only one card left.

"Now, hang on just a sec. You're the one who brought it up."

"I just think _some_ people have a hard time believing anyone could be just _that_ lucky." I looked up at him. "That is, without cheating."

"Do _you_ think I cheat?" asked Hiro. His tone was somewhere between teasing, genuine curiosity, and apprehension. Like beneath the veneer, he might've actually cared about my opinion.

"I'm reserving judgement until I know the truth," I said. Which wasn't entirely true, but if he wasn't going to give me anything, then I would do the same.

"Oh, I don't believe that for a second," said Hiro. He squinted, leaning in to scrutinize me. "Why do you wanna know, anyway?"

"Is it so hard to believe I can ask a question out of pure curiosity?" I asked, putting on my best puppy-dog eyes, feigning the picture of innocence. It wasn't a lie, anyway. Honestly, who would I even tell?

"Hey, hey, enough with the face," said Hiro. "Stop it. That's not fair. And yeah, that is a bit hard to believe. Can't trust just anyone, ya know?"

"So you don't trust me?" I asked.

"Do you trust _me_?" he asked.

"I asked you first."

He looked at me a moment before answering. "You're not the problem here," said Hiro, pointing to the camera in the corner of the room. "They're always watching…"

I grimaced, lips a thin line. "Right…" We were never alone in this place, were we? "Still, there's gotta be someone you can trust, right? Otherwise, you'd go mad."

"Well, yeah," he said. "I suppose that's true for everyone though, innit? Besides, once you open a door to let someone in, the easier it is for them to just walk back out."

"I'm sorry…" I said. "I didn't mean—"

"Nah, it's alright. I think… being a child of divorce just kinda fucks with your brain, ya know?" he said.

"How'd you know my parents are split up?"

"Lucky guess. Ya got a chip on your shoulder."

"I do?" I asked. _What the hell was that supposed to mean?_
"Kidding!" said Hiro. "Jeez, kid, lighten up. I can just tell. It's your aura."

"My aura?"

"Nah, my parents are divorced, too. Ma doesn't like to talk about it, so I don't ask."

"You live with your mom?" I asked.

"Yep," he said, and I could tell by his fond smile and the way his eyes shone, there was a lot of love there. "Lived, though. Lived." Emphasis on the past tense. "Taught me everything I know. You'd like her, I think."

"You think so?"

"Yeah," he said, with a nod. "You're both… Tough."

Hm… Tough. I could live with that. Yeah, that had a nice sound to it. Even if I didn't know what that really meant—that I reminded Hiro of his mother.

"You think I'm tough?" I asked.

"Yeah!" said Hiro. "How do I put this? Like you don't put up with any shit. Ma is the same way."

I hope he didn't notice my face growing hot. He didn't seem to, he just kept on talking.

"—And she's a nurse. Cool, right?"

"Very cool."

"Raised me all by herself, which musta been tough. I doubt I made it easy on her, ya know? Sometimes I wish I could thank her, for—for putting up with a jobless heathen like me. Show her my appreciation somehow."

I nodded. "I feel that. Only a little though. I've always been agreeable." I was teasing, just a little.

Hiro laughed. "That you are," he said, which surprised me.

He reached into his coat, pulling out a rumpled picture and showing to me. "That's her right here."

The picture was crinkled, with noticeable folds down the center, but that only meant he must've had it on him for a long while. In the photo was a picture of the two of them: Hiro, looking much younger, possibly in his early teens, smiling a bright cheesy smile. He had braces and his locs were much shorter. Beside him was a pretty woman with long pink hair and an easy smirk.

To my surprise, she looked pretty young to be a mom. But looks could be deceiving.

"She's—"

"Whatever you do, do not say she's hot. I've heard that too many times, and I do not care if you're a kid, if you say she's hot I will square up."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Pretty. I was gonna say pretty."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Good."

"And how does she feel about your little hobby?" I asked.
He rolled his eyes. "She doesn't exactly approve, but like she has any room to talk. When I say 'taught me everything I know', I mean that literally. I used to sit in her lap while she played mahjongg. I can just hear the sound of the tiles..." His eyes were far away. Then he shook his head, coming back. "Besides, apparently she's done much worse. But she won't say, even if I ask—which is so cryptic, don'tcha think?"

"Parents are people, too," I said. "They have their own lives we may never know about. Just like you have yours."

"Guess so. It's like a little unspoken rule, or something. I don't ask her for money, and she doesn't ask how I pay my rent, it's a win-win... She was... so proud of me when I got in here. I doubt this is exactly the situation she had in mind."

He sighed.

"You miss her, don't you?"

"That even a question? 'Course I do. Wouldn't you? Nah, you're still a kid, that must mean you hate your parents no matter what."

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

"'Cause every teenager hates their parents. Or are you one of those nerds who says their mom is their best friend?"

"Hey! You're one of those nerds, too!" I said. A moment passed before I added, "I do miss her."

"At least you have Junko, though, right?"

"Yeah, guess so. It wasn't always like that though. Just me and my mom."

"Kicking ass, solving crimes?"

I laughed. "Yeah, something like that. We didn't even really have a home—not in the traditional sense. She's my home."

He nodded, smiling and even though he didn't say anything, I could tell he understood.

"Sometimes it's hard to remember there was a time before that, you know what I mean?" I said. "And... they're in like two completely separate parts of my lives. The... the fact that I sometimes wish I could go back to when it was just me and her... And then I remember Junko is not a part of it, and it makes me feel so guilty."

"Yeah. It's always just been me and her, as long as I could remember," said Hiro. "I mean, boyfriends have come and gone, but at the end of the day, it's just us."

"Do you ever see your dad?" I asked, despite the warning feeling in my gut that I was being intrusive.

He shook his head. "Mom says I look like him." At seeing my confused expression he added, "My dad, I mean—which must be true because I don't look like her at all. Even though I wish I did. She says she'd make a funny looking guy, and I should be glad I look handsome and tall, like my dad, but I don't really care. I mean, it's nice and all but..."

I bit my lip, trying to ignore the subtle brag. I didn’t want to ruin the moment. It was nice getting him
Hiro shrugged. "I dunno. Sometimes she looks at me, and for a moment, I think she sees him ‘cause she has this sad look in her eye, and I... I hate it. I hate reminding her of him."

He sighed again, shaking his head and smiling to himself in a way that seemed to be self-critical.

“She says he was a good man, but I’m not sure I believe that. I mean, how can he be when—well... anyway, that’s the only thing she ever really says about him. Sometimes I wonder what he'd think of me... But usually I get so mad that he's gone that I'm glad it's just me and Mom. Who needs him, right?"

Well, it wasn't like I didn't understand where he was coming from.

“‘Who needs him’ sounds about right,” I said. I conceded. “Well, maybe not, but saying it feels good.”

"Hah. You're not gonna lecture me?" said Hiro. "Most people would tell me I should just love him ‘cause he's my dad."

I shook my head. "Nah. Then again, my dad abandoned our family taking my only sister with him, so... I maybe don't have the most fair opinion of him." A moment of pause before I added, "I look like my mom, by the way. Yep. I look like my mom, and... Junko looks like a supermodel." I sighed, trying not to let the jealousy show, even if I was feeling it inside. "Fair trade if you ask me."

He laughed, this time a little weaker. "Families are complicated. You're a good listener."

"Thanks. So are you."

"There's always a catch, though, yeah?"

"No catch," I said, for once fully sincere. "I swear."

For a moment, he said nothing, just watched me. Then, he set his cards down. "Okay. Rule number one when it comes to gambling. Confidence."

Oh.

So we were right back to cards, like the whole conversation never happened.

"Confidence," I repeated with a nod, suddenly aware of myself and straightening my posture. "Right."

"Always play to win," said Hiro, with much more command and authority than I’d ever seen from him. "Remember that. Take it from someone who knows a thing or two about gambling, you can't be scared. You can't doubt yourself."

I was surprised. Where was this self-assuredness coming from? The Hiro I knew certainly seemed to think highly of himself, but he also was always on the skittish side. There was just something about him, even when he volunteered to be in charge. He just lacked... something.

If Junko were here she would definitely place it as him being, as she would say, "a few cards short of a deck", but it wasn't that. What was it? Decisiveness? Conviction? Steadfastness?

Something like that.
But I nodded again, nonetheless, grateful for his advice, even if I didn't have plans to gamble anytime soon. "Got it."

"You have to bet on yourself, Mukuro," said Hiro. "Because if you don't, no one else will, yeah?"

Which was surprisingly insightful for Hiro, but I didn't say anything. I just kept it to myself.

"Oh, and always trust your instincts," he added, finally picking up his cards again. "You got a queen in there somewhere?"

"Yep." I handed over my card. "Is that what you do?" I asked, avoiding his gaze and instead focusing on my hand once more.

"What?" he asked.

"Trust your instincts, I mean," I said, glancing up at him for just second before going back. "Is that your secret?"

"It's not exactly a secret," said Hiro. "Look, you can have every trick in the book, but at the end of the day that's all a player can really do. Trusting my gut's never done me wrong before."

I was finally getting him to talk.

"So that really is all there is to it, isn't it?" I asked, unable to help the mystified smile as I beamed at him. "You're not a cheat, you're just one lucky bastard."

"I wouldn't call it luck. That's simplifying it way too much. Makes it sound totally lame, yeah?" he said.

"So then what is it?" I asked. "You got any aces?"

I saw the corner of his mouth twitch in a small smile. It wasn't the wide-mouthed uninhibited grin I was used to at all, and the way he was looking at me told me I wasn't getting any answers right now.

Hiro shook his head. "Go fish. Last card in the pile, right?"

I nodded, drawing the last card.

"Alright," said Hiro. "Who has the most matching suits?"

I snorted, throwing down my cards on the table. "You, obviously."

"Hah!" he said, standing up from his chair. "That means you have to ask the others if they're game for poker."

I sighed. "Alright. But that doesn't seem entirely fair. Poker was your idea, not mine."

"Alright, fine, how about a happy medium?" he asked.

"Oh?" I asked, quirking an eyebrow in intrigue. "And what's that?"

"So, Byakuya is probably in the library right now, yeah?" he asked.

"Yeah…" I said, not really following.

"Which means Toko is probably there, too, right?"
"Yeah, but—"

"If you ask those two, then I'll ask Chihiro and Celeste!" said Hiro.

I frowned. "Those don't match up to me."

Chihiro was not nearly the same level of unapproachable as the other three. Still, the idea of not having to ask Celeste any favors was appealing. I was tempted.

"Fine," I said with a resigned sigh. "But only if you carry me down the flight of stairs."

"Hm... Fireman carry, bridal, or piggyback?" he asked.

"Are you actually considering it?" I asked. I chuckled, thinking it over. "Piggyback."

I didn't have any particular reason for that specific caveat. I just thought the mental image was kind of funny. And I really didn't feel like walking today.

He tapped his chin, considering it a moment before he held out his hand. "Done."

We shook on it.

"But—!" he added, "Only if you time me because I wanna see how fast I can run."

"I would, but I don't have a timer..." I said, but Hiro seemed to know what I was thinking.

"No prob! I gotcha covered." He pulled a pocket watch from deep within his pocket and tossed it to me.

I caught it just in time, silently thankful for not dropping it. I turned it over and over in my hands, taking in the engraved pattern on the front. "Where did you get this?"

"Bought it! Off some guy at an antique shop. Kinda sketch if you ask me, but it looks cool, right? All the greats have used this bad boy at one point or another—Genghis Khan, George Washington, Napoleon."

I smiled to myself. Even when he was beating me at cards, I could always trust Hiro to be a sucker.

"Sometimes I like to pretend it's a family heirloom. Like it was passed down from my great-great grandfather or something. Wouldn't that be cool?"

"I think so, yes. I've never had a family heirloom before."

"Neither have I. I have no idea if it's still accurate, tho," said Hiro.

"It's beautiful," I said, admiring it as I opened it up so that I could watch the second hand tick.

I checked the clock on the wall. Sure enough, the pocket watch was fast by two hours.

"Yeah…" He looked at me a moment before adding, "You know what? Keep it."

"Oh, no, I couldn't!" I said, feeling my face going red.

I closed it back up, trying to hand it back to him, but he just held his hands up to refuse.

"Nah, it's yours," he said. "I got a lot more stuff where that came from. Now are we gonna do this thing, or what, boss? I got a card game I'd like to get to."
I grinned. "You're on."

—

"Hello, Chihiro. How are you?"

At hearing my voice from behind her, Chihiro jumped, clutching her chest. "Oh! You gave me a fright."

I placed my basket down on top of a machine closeby. "Sorry, didn't meant to sneak up on you."

Chihiro smiled, breathing a sigh of relief. "That's ok, you just surprised me that's all."

"Laundry day?" I asked.

"Yep." She nodded, gesturing to the basket of clothes beside her, opening up the cover to the washing machine. Her brow was furrowed in fixed concentration. Every so often, she would make a face, tossing clothes into the machine. She looked lost.

I watched her struggle for a moment in silent enjoyment before finally deciding to say something. "Chihiro, have you… have you never done laundry before?"

"What? Yes!" she said, much too fast. "I…" Chihiro sighed. "How could you tell?"

"That's way too much detergent," I said, pointing to the container in her hand which was nearly full. "And you didn't sort your clothes."

"Are we supposed to?"

I chuckled to myself. "Super genius child prodigy future CEO Chihiro Fujisaki doesn't know how to do her own laundry?"

"Oh, I know how, I just… It's been a while."

"Ok. Then go ahead," I said, watching her with perhaps a little too much glee.

She nodded, her expression resolute. "Ok."

It took her a minute before she looked to me again.

"I… may have forgotten a few steps," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Are we—are we supposed to use one machine for shirts and another for pants or something?"

"What?" I asked, surprised by her question. I got the feeling she'd never done her own laundry before, but now it was really striking me. She had never done her own laundry. "No, you… wow, you've really never done this before."

Chihiro fidgeted a moment in silence before admitting, "Ok, you caught me. I'm a laundry virgin."

Her laugh was sheepish, going red in the face.

I laughed as well. "It's ok, now's as good as any a time to learn, yeah?"

"Absolutely!" Chihiro nodded. "I always meant to learn someday, I guess… It's just that I've always
had people who do that for me."

Wow. What must it be like to be rich?

I put my thoughts aside. Feelings of jealousy and wishful thinking could wait. It was laundry time.

"Ok. Laundry," I said. "First things first, you wanna use maybe a third that amount when it comes to detergent." I gestured again to the dispenser in her hand, which was full of powder.

"Oh! Uh, ok." She poured some of it back into the container, some of the contents spilling out onto the floor.

"Yeah. Too much soap, and the machine overflows with suds."

"Got it." She nodded, brow furrowed in concentration like she was hanging onto my every word. It was adorable.

I bit back the urge to laugh. "Second, you want to sort your clothes beforehand—one for colors, one for whites, and one for delicates."

I gestured to my own basket. "Since no one else is here, we have the washroom to ourselves. Lucky us."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means that you can use multiple machines, instead of waiting for the load to finish before starting the next. Takes a lot less time that way."

I flipped up the lid to three machines, then proceeded to sort my clothes. "Just like this."

"Oh! And why do we need to sort them out like that?" asked Chihiro as she watched me, eyes wide with rapt interest.

"Because if you mix 'em up, the colors bleed onto the whites and ruin your clothes."

"Ah! I see. That makes so much sense now that you say it."

I waited for her to do the same. When she was finished, I turned the dial on my machines.

"Alright, look here," I said, pointing to the dials. "Now you set the machine cycle. Warm water is best for cleaning. However, if you don't want your colors to fade or bleed, use cold water. It's your judgement call."

Chihiro nodded, pausing a moment before turning the knob.

"And, you can just press it," I said, pressing the button on the machine and closing the lid to the washer, Chihiro nodding and following suit.

"And then?" asked Chihiro.

"And then we wait."

"Do people normally leave their clothes?" asked Chihiro.

"It depends. Here, I would say, it might be ok. If the door to the machine locks when it's full of water, yes, but make sure you're back in time. But most people definitely stay with their clothes
while they dry, otherwise somebody might take them. But it should only be about twenty to thirty minutes before we have to turn them over."

"Oh, well, I don't mind waiting," said Chihiro.

We sat beside each other in those hard plastic chairs. I picked up a magazine off the table. It was an old edition, but I figured I might enjoy looking at the pictures. A minute or so had gone by when I noticed Chihiro scratching her arm.

"You ok?"

"Huh?" She looked up at me. "Oh, yeah. It's nothing." She winced, but continued to scratch vigorously.

"What happened?"

"Actually, I got bit by a mosquito yesterday. Sorry, I just didn't want to worry you."

"No need to apologize. Can I—?" I asked, holding out a hand.

She nodded, pulling back her sleeve and holding out her arm to show me. The huge bump was red and swollen, standing out against her pale skin.

"Ouch," I said. That wasn't very helpful, so I added, "Maybe they have ointment in the nurse's office."

"Oh! Good idea, Mukuro. You're so smart."

"Heh, thanks," I muttered, feeling my face grow warm. "That's a nasty bite you've got there."

She nodded. "It's starting to hurt."

"Really though, are you sure that isn't some sort of reaction? That's pretty big for a mosquito bite. I know sometimes you can't do anything when they get you in your sleep like that, but—"

"Oh, no. Actually, I was awake," said Chihiro.

"You were awake? But wouldn't you notice something like that?"

"I did, but I just felt so bad… By the time I noticed, it was already too late. I didn't want to smack it, you know? That would've been cruel."

"I suppose I get what you mean," I said, even though I was mostly being nice. I couldn't see myself extending the same courtesy. I hated mosquitos. The feeling didn't seem to be mutual. By the end of every summer, my legs were always covered in bites.

"Mosquitos are living beings, too," said Chihiro. "I don't like thinking about it, because then I picture it's little mosquito family being sad." She laughed. "Sorry, I know that's dumb."

I shook my head, laughing, too. "No, I get what you mean…. You really care about that sort of thing, don't you?"

She smiled, seemingly grateful at my understanding. "Yes, I do. All living beings deserve respect."

A moment passed in quiet before I said, "There should be more people like you."
Her eyes went wide. "Like me? You must be joking. But I—I don't have anything to offer. I don't know why anyone would want to be like me. I haven't even contributed to the group at all. I feel like everyone else is working so hard to get us out, and I haven't done anything at all! I'm so… pathetic, and weak, and—"

"Kind?" I said. "Empathetic. Brave."

"You don't mean that…"

"I do. You'll get your chance. I know it." A thought struck me. "Hey, remember when you stood up to Monokuma yesterday?"

"Y-Yes, but that was—"

"That was amazing! You should be proud of yourself. You didn't just impress me, you impressed everyone."

"Yeah…" She giggled. "Even Mondo thought it was cool."

"See? And just between us…" I lowered my voice, even though we were the only two people in the room. "I think you're cooler than Mondo."

"What?" she gasped. "But he's so tough! You're just saying that."

"Cross my heart. Just… don't tell him I said that," I added.

Chihiro giggled again. "I won't. Promise." But she went back to absentmindedly scratching the bump on her arm.

"I don't think you should scratch that any more. It'll just make it worse, and you'll leave a scar."

"I know." Chihiro made a face, wrinkling her nose. "But it just itches so bad!" She gave it one last rough scratch before finally letting it go. "Does make you wonder, though."

"About?"

"How it got in here," said Chihiro. "This place is completely sealed off, right? Unless there's some sort of nature-y spot, like… like a garden or a greenhouse or something?" She gasped. "Or maybe there's some sort of secret passage out of here!"

"Maybe," I said, trying to make her feel better more than anything else. I doubted there would be something so simple as a secret passage to get out of here.

Still, she did have a good point about the mosquito…

"Well, even if there's not, I'm sure we'll get out of here somehow. As long as we all work together, I'm sure we'll be out of here in no time," I said.

"You're right! Working together is super important… Of course, I dunno how I can be useful." And she was back down again. "I'll probably just weigh you all down… Even Byakuya is helping, and he doesn't even talk to anyone!"

"Byakuya will help in his way, and you will help in yours," I said.

"Sure, but I bet having a…" She lowered her voice to a whisper, "strong AI to help us would do much more than anything I had to offer."
"If such a thing existed, of course," I said, eyes darting to the camera in the corner of the room.

"Yes!" said Chihiro, and I was grateful she'd caught on so quickly. "If such a thing existed."

"As long as we're talking in hypotheticals here," I said, "What exactly is a strong AI?"

"Oh… Well, I only know the general idea, but, you see, in the field of artificial intelligence, there's strong AI and weak AI. Weak AI isn't meant to match human intelligence. It's simply a type of problem-solving software. A weak AI isn't actually thinking, it's just executing actions programmed into it. Strong AI, on the other hand, is a program that can achieve true self-consciousness—full ego awareness. In other words, a strong AI is a complete entity, a computer program capable of becoming aware."

"So which one is…"

"Is Byakuya's friend?" asked Chihiro. "I wouldn't know. I don't know how close he is to achieving sentience. Or something like that. God, that makes it sound like Skynet…" She laughed. "I'm getting ahead of myself. Plenty of experts don't think it's even possible, anyway…"

"How do you know so much about computers?" I asked.

"What?"

"Well, I didn't know computers had all that much to do with, uh… being an heiress."

"Uh… I have a lot of spare time," said Chihiro. "My dad, you know, head of the Fujisaki corporation, always insisted I dedicate a lot of time to my studies. He knows I'm into this, uh, techy stuff, so he pulled some strings to get me an internship in silicon valley, but, um… It didn't work out. I find that I tend to work better in, uh… solo environments. I'm not nearly at the same level as Byakuya, though."

"But it seems to be something you really enjoy."

She nodded. "I do, I do."

"Then who cares if you're not the best? What's going to stop you from pursuing your interests?"

"I… That's a nice idea, Mukuro, but I have responsibilities. I can't just—I have my father's company."

"You know, you don't have to do what's expected of you. You should never do something just because it's what someone else would want."

"I—I've tried getting out of my father's shadow. I've really tried."

"Maybe this is it, then. Maybe you just need something that's yours and yours alone."

"I told you, I already tried that. I… I used to trade stocks."

"Day trading? But is that even allowed? I mean, you're still in high school."

"I don't always have to be virtuous," said Chihiro, with a weak smile, but there was something sly behind it that was unusual coming from her. "I was pretty good at it, too, at one point my personal net worth was over 4 billion dollars."

Holy shit.
"At one point?" I asked.

"I… I couldn't keep it up," said Chihiro. "It's too much for me. Too… uh, intense. Besides, I donate most of my earnings to charity these days."

My mind went back to the forum posts I'd been reading about all the Ultimates. There hadn't been much on Chihiro—the Fujisakis were known for being an extremely private family—but I did recall some talk about all the different charities Chihiro had founded.

"I think I know what your thing is," I said.

"Huh? My thing?"

"Yes," I said. "The thing that sets you apart from everyone else. It's helping people."

"Oh," Chihiro flushed a bright shade of pink. "You're just saying that."

"Seriously! I feel a little out of my depth, coming here. You're like this prodigy scion, what are you even still doing in high school?"

Chihiro hung her head. "My father said it would do me some good to meet people my age." She sighed. "He's always right. Even though we might be stuck here… I regret not doing it sooner. I—I've spent too long in a bubble. I've relied on my father and his assets much too much. But no more!"

She looked to me. "I'm glad to have met you, Mukuro Ikusaba."

I smiled. "I'm glad to have met you, too."

The buzzer went off on our machines, startling us both.

I jumped from my seat. "Looks like it's time to switch the clothes over. C'mon."

I began to pull everything out of the washing machine.

"Last thing," I said. "Once everything is all washed, for anything you're worried might shrink in the dryer, you want to air-dry it instead."

"Thank you so much," said Chihiro. "You are an excellent teacher."

"It's nothing," I said waving her off with a hand but that didn't stop my ears from burning. "Give me five." I held out my hand, and Chihiro gave me an enthusiastic high-five.

Finally, I flipped my clothes over to the dryer, demonstrating the different settings to Chihiro real quick before sitting back down in our seats, waiting once more for our clothes to dry.

Chihiro was quiet for a minute. I went back to flipping through that old magazine, trying to ignore the faint sound of Chihiro picking at her fingernails.

She paused, looking over at me again. "Can I tell you something?" she asked.

I looked up. "What is it?"

Her voice was small. "I… I'm terrified of the future."

I nodded, hesitating a moment before admitting, "Me, too."

"Someday, my dad is going to step down, and I'm going to be in charge, and I don't know what I'm
going to do when that day comes. I'm so scared. I'm so worried that everything he's worked for—I'm
going to be the weak link that lets it all fall apart. I mean, I can't even do my own laundry!"

"Hey," I said, putting a hand on hers. "Hey… Don't worry about it. One thing at a time. Let's just
focus on getting out of here, first. Once we get out of here, then we can start worrying, but until then,
let's not worry about that until we have to."

She gulped, nodding. "You're right. Thank you, Mukuro."

"Besides," I said. "You got the laundry down. I'm sure there's nothing you can't handle."

She giggled. "That makes me feel much better."

At last, our laundry was dry. With a heave and a loud groan, I unloaded my warm clothes into a
messy pile on the nearby table, some loose socks dropping onto the floor in my haste.

"Oops," I said, picking up my socks from off the ground, then beginning to fold my laundry.

"You're going to fold your clothes here?" asked Chihiro.

"Why not?" I said. "If it were crowded I might take it back to my room but… I like hanging out with
you."

Chihiro blushed. "Th-Thanks." She opening up the dryer, piling everything into her laundry basket.

A few minutes passed.

"Mukuro?"

"Hm?"

"I have something to tell you."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I—I'm not who you guys think I am."

"Okay… So then, who are you?"

Chihiro hesitated, then pulled a familiar red envelope out of her pocket, handing it to me. It was
addressed to her. I recognized it as one of the letters Monokuma had given us—our second
motivation.

"Why are you giving me this?" I asked.

"I—Whenever I try to say it, I can't," said Chihiro. "So just… Just take it."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She nodded.

Hesitantly, I opened up the envelope, taking out the card inside.

*Chihiro Fujisaki was born a man.*

Suddenly, all the secrecy, all the tiptoeing around—avoiding the time in the bath house, the locker
rooms, any invitations from Sakura and Hina to train. All that talk about getting stronger—it all made
But first and foremost, before I could ask any questions, I had to reassure Chihiro—who was watching me with apprehension.

"Thank you," I said, "For trusting me enough to share this with me."

"You—You're not mad?" asked Chihiro.

"Why would I be mad?" I said.

"What? Because I lied to everyone," said Chihiro. It came out sounding like a question—like Chihiro couldn't fathom why I was being so calm about this. "I'm so sorry for lying."

"If anything, I think we should be apologizing to you. The fact that you haven't felt comfortable enough to share this with us must be very hard for you. But I have to ask," I said. "What do I call you, now?"

"Huh?"

"Does this change any way you would like me to address you?" I asked.

"Oh, uh, no! I mean, yes. I mean… Maybe," said Chihiro. "Actually, I was hoping this wouldn't change anything. You understand, right? I just—I don't feel ready to tell everyone just yet."

I nodded. "And you don't want them to get suspicious."

"Right," said Chihiro. She hesitated a moment before adding, "I was just so tired of keeping secrets. And hiding myself from the world. And relying my father's fortune. I had to say something."

"I promise I won't tell," I said.

"You're a good friend," said Chihiro. "I spent so many years never leaving home, thinking I could hide. Hiring tutors, working from home, paying people to do things for me, crafting this whole new identity for myself whenever I left the house. I don't want to shut myself out like that anymore. I was so lucky, most people don't have the resources I was born into, but it only made me weaker."

"If this is how you want to live, then it's not a lie," I said. "You're not pretending."

"Thank you, Mukuro," said Chihiro. "But I think coming here has finally given me a little perspective. I've always been so focused on being strong, that's all I've ever wanted. But I was in a bubble. Coming here, I've realized there are many kinds of strength. Boys are expected to be masculine and tough, and I was never like that. It's so… so…"

"Rigid?" I suggested.

"Yes. Rigid. While I still want to learn to be strong, I'm trying to be better. I shouldn't have to prove myself as a man. I associated so much weakness with femininity, but I was wrong. But I thought I could learn to like living as a girl, but, I just… I don't really feel comfortable. I've never really felt comfortable with it. But I felt like I was trying to live up to this ideal, something I'm not. I wish I didn't have to live up to expectations."

Chihiro looked so forlorn. I had to say something.

"So don't," I said.
"What?"

"Don't worry about anybody's expectations. Just live for you. And... you don't have to choose. You don't have to decide, not yet. I understand if you were born a boy, but we all still have time to figure out what we are inside." I laughed, which seemed to surprise her. "I mean, you're still in high school! You don't have to know right away."

"But... But you always seem so sure of yourself!" said Chihiro.

"Trust me," I said, "I'm just as lost as you. The truth is that nobody knows what they're doing."

Chihiro nodded, and I could see her eyes were wet with tears, but for once, they did not look to be tears of sadness. "You are very wise."

"Why, thank you," I said, corners of my mouth turning up in a small smile.

Just then we were interrupted of the sounds of two other people entering the laundry room.

"Oh!" Chihiro sniffed, wiping their nose and trying to compose themself before speaking again. "Hello, Leon and Hina."

"Hey!" Leon grinned. "Chihiro! We didn't think anybody else would be in here."

"We just came in here to borrow the laundry carts," said Hina.

"What for?" I asked.

"Don't tell Taka," said Leon, "But we wanted to see if we could use them to race down the halls."

"I'm sorry, you what?" said Chihiro, at the same time I snorted with laughter.

"Come with!" said Hina. "We need another team anyway. Someone to push, and someone to sit in the cart."

Chihiro glanced over at me out of the corner of her eye. "Should we..."

I grinned at them, grabbing a nearby laundry card and wheeling it over to her. "Well?" I asked. "Get in."

Chihiro smiled.

—

"Oi! Mukyutie!"

Oh, God.

At the sound of the familiar high-pitched voice, I dropped the spoon in my hand. I turned around to see Sparkling Justice smiling at me with those sharp teeth and lolling tongue of hers, staring me right in the face and uncomfortably close.

"Ah! Hello, Sparkling Justice. I was just putting the kettle on. I didn't see you come in."

I forced a smile.

Mukyutie? Was that meant to be for me?
"I didn't realize you were... out. Would you like some tea?" I asked, more out of pure courtesy than anything else.

"Aaaahhhhh... I got bored just sitting around. All this pent up energy has got to be directed somewhere, right?"

"Sure," I said. "Well, if I can help you find an outlet, by all means."

If it meant she wasn't going to kill anybody, I could... kill some time. Besides, as much as I was itching to get out, I had to wait for my tea.

"Although if you're looking for Byakuya, I think he's in the library," I added.

"Byakuya?" asked Jill. "Why on Earth would I be looking for Byakuya?"

"Uh... Because Toko..."

"Because Toko... what?" said Jill. "You know, it's very presumptuous to assume that alters must always share the same interests."

_Because Toko's interest included anime, and yours include... murder._

Jill shook her head. "God, I should've guessed Gloomy would have gone for a loser like him. That guy is no good for her, I can tell." She nodded sagely, and I was struck by how odd and unusual it was for me to see her all serious. "He is cute though, I'll give him that."

"I can't say I trust him either," I said. I had no comment about the cute part.

Sparkling Justice cackled. "Ooh, do you want me to kill that guy for you? 'Cause I'll totally kill him if you want me to!"

"Th—that's not necessary!" I said, putting my hands up. "I may not get along with Byakuya, but I'd never wish death upon him. Besides, doesn't that go against your rule? You don't kill without reason."

"That's true..." said Jill. "Do you want me to dig up dirt on him first, and then kill him?"

"Look, I told you, no killing." My voice was firm. I gave her a stern look, my ability to not crack under the pressure surprising even myself.

She groaned. "But that's so dull. I can't just sit here, collecting dust. I need to do something!"

"Well, maybe you could put your efforts into helping us get out of here..." I said, but I was interrupted.

"It's no use!" whined Jill. "That'd be like telling a peach tree to grow apples or oranges. I am what I am, there's no changing that. Rid the world of evil, and maybe I'll consider taking up a new hobby, but until then!" she trilled.

"But... The world will never truly be rid of evil."

"Well, duh!" said Jill.

"But you know that, don't you?"

Sparkling Justice rolled her eyes. "Ok, whatever. I see you want to take the 'moral high ground'."
She put on a huge fake yawn. "Boring!"

"It's not just that," I said. "I don't want Toko to get in trouble. I care about what happens to her."

She eyed me with suspicion. "Why the hell would you care about Gloomy?"

"Because I'm her friend. And you killing anybody while we're trapped here puts her in danger."

She continued to scrutinize me. "Toko doesn't have any friends… That's why she has me."

"If that's the case, I don't think you're a very good friend to her."

She grinned. "Not a good friend? Why, my entire existence functions to serve her!"

"Well, either way. I think it would be a very unhealthy lifestyle if your only friend was a serial killer who you couldn't even talk to," I said.

She cackled again. "That's true. You got me there. You know…" She tapped her chin, looking pensive. "Sometimes I wonder what would happen if she got her shit together, you know? Do you think I would cease to exist?"

"I don't know," I said, probably unhelpfully. "Maybe. Is that why you're here? To thrive on her misery?"

"Thrive on it?" said Jill. She tutted, clicking her tongue as she shook her head in mock disappointment. "No, no, no, my sweet child, you misunderstand me. I'm simply here to help the poor girl. As long as she's unhappy, I'm unhappy. She needs me."

"Well, if you're worried about disappearing if or once she gets better," I said, "it sounds to me like you need her a lot more than she needs you."

For a moment, she was quiet. Like she was contemplating something.

"You said you came into being because it was your job to help Toko, right?" I asked.

She didn't answer. I took that as a confirmation.

"Why? What was wrong?" I asked.

She folded her arms, completely closed off to me. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid that's confidential information. It's extremely inappropriate to ask a question like that to a victim of trauma, you know? Besides, I don't remember why. Not exactly. Do you remember your own birth?"

I shook my head.

"Why should it be any different for me?" she asked.

"You told us at… at the trial, that Toko wasn't happy with you," I said. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I think you're only doing what you think is best, not what she thinks is best. You're ignoring her needs on purpose. Have you considered that the reason you act the way you do… Is because you don't actually want things to get better?"

Jill's knuckles were white, her hands clenched into tight fists at her side. Then, she grabbed a butter knife that was sitting loose on the counter, holding it right up to me.

With one arm, she pinned me against the wall with surprising force. "Hey! What's the big idea,
huh?" Her eyes were red, piercing, full of rage.

"Jill—!" I said, hoarse from having the wind knocked out of me. But she wasn't done.

"You think you can assign everything I do with this deep intrinsic meaning? Well, guess what? You're wrong! There is no meaning! I am the way I am, and it's not something you can analyze like your little game of Clue! I should just kill you right now!"

Beside us, the kettle began to whistle.

"You'd only be proving me right," I croaked out, probably against my own better judgement.

"Oh? And why's that?" she asked, the knife inching closer to my throat. It wasn't sharp, but even so, I didn't trust her with it.

"Because right now, all I see is someone who cares more about themself and their own gratification more than they care about the alter they care so much to 'protect'. And if you kill me, knowingly putting Toko in danger at the mercy of the class trial, it'll prove it to everyone else, too." Depite the warning alarm bells going off in my head, I kept talking. "Prove to me that your whole gimmick isn't just a facade to act out your violent impulses under the guise of 'protection'. Please, Jill."

The nickname seemed to disarm her. She let go of me, letting the knife fall to the ground with a loud clatter.

"You've got a lot of nerve, kid, for trying to lecture the mighty morphin' murderous fiend. Try to change me all you want, but if you're looking for some deep, gut-wrenching tragic backstory, I'm afraid you're not getting it from me. As for an explanation, let me just say this: it's easier to kill than to try not to! Kyeehahaha!"

Sparkling Justice continued to cackle to herself. Leaving her to her own devices, I slunk out of the room before she could notice, deciding I wasn't in the mood for tea anymore.

—

Junko scowled. "I don't see why Hiro has to hover like that," she said, giving Hiro a look as he watched the game from over my shoulder.

"Because," I explained patiently, "I asked him to show me how to play, so he's gonna help me for at least one round until I get the hang of it."

"But wasn't this whole thing his idea?" asked Junko with an irritated huff. "By the way, I match your bottle of black nail polish, Celeste." Junko held up a bottle of holographic nail-polish before setting it down. "And raise the bet one bag of powdered donuts I nicked from the pantry." She tossed the paper bag into the pile with a low thud.

"Ugh," said Celeste. "I hate processed foods."

They were arguing about the validity of her bet entry, so Hiro leaned in to examine my hand again.

"Hang on, Mukuro, let me see," said Hiro.

"Ugh," scoffed Junko. "Backseat driver, much?"

I ignored her, since my turn was coming up. I was about to fold, but Hiro put up a hand. "Wait," he said to me, voice low in my ear, taking the time to coach me while the other two were distracted.
"What are you doing?"

"Folding," I whispered back. "Junko raised the bet again, I can't compete with that."

"Are you kidding? See, that?" He pointed to the cards in my hand. "Right there, you have three of a kind."

"I know," I snapped. "You already explained it to me."

"Fine." We were interrupted by Celeste's voice, loud in irritation and surrender to Junko. "I don't care anymore. Chihiro?"

Chihiro frowned.

I was more than happy to let it go. Hiro, however, was not finished. "Then what are you waiting for?"

"We're still on this?" I asked, but I was mostly teasing.

"Why not? Go for it!" It was somewhat amusing experiencing him attempt to keep his volume low despite his excitement. "I bet the others don't have anything. Watch, Chihiro is going to fold."

Sure enough that's what happened.

"Okay, that was just lucky—" I tried to counter, but he ignored me.

"Look at Celeste, she's totally bluffing."

"You can't know that."

"You'll see."

I rolled my eyes. "I fold," I said, shooting Hiro a challenging look—perhaps a bit too stubborn just to make a point.

"Oh, that's too bad," said Celeste, but the way she was smiling told me she didn't feel bad at all. "Well, I'm all in."

"Shit…" Junko considered it a moment, before finally grumbling, "Fine. I fold, too."

When I raised my eyebrows in surprise, she added, "I'm all out of nail polish, and I don't want to start throwing in snack-run IOUs. I haven't sunk that low yet."

Celeste smirked, finally showing us her cards.

"What!" cried Junko, slamming her fists on the table in outrage. "Nothing? You were bluffing this whole time?"

"And that's why I love poker," said Hiro—more to himself probably than to anyone in particular.

"Damnit!" said Junko, throwing her cards down, and finally getting a look at her hand I could see that she had a pair of jacks.

I barely knew anything about poker, but I was pretty sure even she could've beaten Celeste if she'd just stayed in the game.
Chihiro let out a disappointed click of the tongue. "Wow, Celeste! You are good. I was so sure you had something. See?" She showed us her hand. "I had a full house, if I’d know you were bluffing, I—I would’ve…"

"It's alright," said Celeste, picking up the glittery holo nail polish and handing it to Junko. "Why don't you keep that?"

Junko’s ears went bright red. She looked as if she were about to explode.

I turned to look at Hiro.

"See?" I said. "You were wrong. You said the others didn't have anything. Junko had a pair, and Chihiro had a better hand than me."

He grinned as he stood up so that he was no longer hovering behind me. Still, I could see he was glancing down at me from the corner of his eye. "Yeah, but I was right about Celeste, wasn't I?"

"I—" I said, about to retort, but unable to really find a compelling counterargument. "Fine," I relented, crossing my arms. "That's still only one out of three."

"Hey." He shrugged. "But I got the one that counted. Besides, one outta three is not half-bad, yeah?"

"Technically, it's a little less than half-bad," I said, managing a small smile. "But yes, I get your point."

"What did I say about betting on yourself?" he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Alright, alright, Dad. I think I got it. Now will you join the game now?"

He beamed at me, taking the seat at the table and picking up all the cards, shuffling them up before dealing everyone a new hand.

—

"Kuro, what's the deal?" asked Junko.

"Yeah, what's holdin' you up?" asked Hiro, only I could tell by his tone that he was only asking that to tease me. After all, it was just us two left.

Perhaps uncharacteristically, Junko had folded the first round. Then again, by that point I started to pick up on more of Junko's habits—and she didn't usually bluff with an empty hand.

Since we didn't have money, and we'd run out of miscellaneous garbage to just throw in the betting pool, we'd settled on fetching a huge box of coffee candies from the pantry to split between us.

We'd also set up a kind of a favor system. At the beginning of each round, we'd scribble down post-it notes to divvy up with random chores and favors to do for one another—laundry, cooking, dishes, cleaning, fetching stuff. Things like that. They were like our little get-out-of-jail-free cards for things we didn't want to do, good for one use.

And Junko really hated doing favors for other people.

Celeste either could not or no longer wanted to match the bet, so she was out. And Chihiro had folded a long time ago. It was no surprise to any of us that she was terrible at bluffing.

It was just me and Hiro.
"I see you," I said, matching the number of candies in the pile, despite the fact that if I lost, I would be all out. Still, I was feeling pretty good about my hand. "And I'm raising it a 'does my laundry'. For... a month."

Hopefully we wouldn't still be here in a month. So, really it was a month or until we got out.

Whichever came first.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Hiro. "I thought we agreed the limit on these things was a one-time use."

"Aren't you the one that told me to play with confidence?" I asked with a smirk. "So? Are you in?"

He eyed me a moment, and for once he was impossible to read. I couldn't tell if he was intrigued, pissed, or annoyed.

"Nah," he said with a sigh, tossing his cards face down on the table. "I'm out."

"Hey!" I said. "What's the idea? I thought Yasuhiro Hagakure always plays to win."

And I wanted to beat him at least once before the day was over. But still, what kind of teacher are you if you don't practice what you preach, yeah?

He glared at me a moment before picking up his cards again. "Fine. Then I see your bet, and I raise it one 'making and serving bubble milk tea for breakfast.'"

"Just once?" I asked, since my wager had been for the entire month.

He nodded. "But for the whole class."

I frowned. "I don't have any more candies."

"Aw, that's ok," cooed Hiro sarcastically. "Guess you're gonna have to fold. Or... I could always just sell your organs to make up for the difference. I'm sure you can spare a kidney or something."

"Are we talking for the black market, or for you?" I said. "How's your liver holding up in your old age?"

"Ha, ha, very funny."

"I hear kidneys go for a lot these days," I said. "You can use the money to start a retirement fund."

"Mukuro! Is that any way to talk to your elders?" said Hiro in mock disapproval.

"All I know is that you're not getting ahold of these kidneys."

"Then I guess I'll just have to take them from you!" said Hiro. And with a devilish grin, almost as if he were baring his teeth at me, he tossed aside his cards, bumping the table as he jumped up from his seat.

"Oh, no you don't!" I said, laughing as I backed away from him.

"Your organs are mine, Ikusaba!"

"You'll have to catch me first!"

Hiro chased me around the rec room, circling the pool table a couple times like a game of cat and
mouse. I let out a shriek as he took a swipe at me, catching me under his arm and rumpling my hair and nearly knocking Junko out of her seat.

"God!" squealed Junko. "You guys are so childish!"

"Sorry, Junko," I said, still chuckling as Hiro let go of me, and I tried to flatten my hair and smooth out my skirt.

"Hmph."

She turned away from us, but behind her back, Hiro shot me a grin and a thumbs up.

Chapter End Notes

Mukuro is finally starting to acknowledge her inner gay? Kyoko knows what she's doing. She knows

Lolololol I love how I just do whatever the heck i want under the guise of "it's a talentswap" aka totally just ignoring canon personalities. Also most of my knowledge of poker comes from movies

Also, not to bring back discourse from 2013, but to me Chihiro's story has always been somewhat reflective of a trans narrative, but they've always been too uncomfortable with presenting as female for me to really believe that Chihiro is a trans girl. But since this Chihiro is still alive, they have a chance to grow as a person and be less dichotomist when it comes to their beliefs on gender. They're still figuring themself out, and that's totally normal for a teenager! So, GNC / nonbinary Chihiro it is!

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