Danganronpa X3: Savior's Last Bloom

by Ace_Nero

Summary

Life seemed to be taking a bright turn for Chiaki Nanami at Hope's Peak with all the bonds she formed until it was all torn apart by her antithesis, Junko Enoshima. After being pulled from death, she's forced to work under a certain organization while enduring psychological torment and the complex relationship with her former teacher.
Despair is such an interesting concept, thought Junko. History will look back and say the one who facilitated this despair was me. However, that's not the truth of despair at all. They don't understand it's actual nature and origin...and that's why the world's destruction was only a matter of time. This circle jerk of peace, this fallacy of harmony—it will come to an end. Even someone like "her" was only a speed bump on the way to this reality. Still, this despair isn't...

"This is what I call prime time television!" yelled Junko, observing the chaos engulfing Hope's Peak. The searing flames sent smoke into the sky while screams of terror and death filled the air. This was truly—in Junko's mind—poetry in motion.

"Wouldn't it have been better if we recruited those Reserve Course students for our cause?" asked Mukuro, making Junko's ecstasy-filled face turn into a scowl.

"You think I'd ever let those pathetic fodder stand by my side? Besides, my new limbs are about to be released into the world."

Junko's smile returned when she imagined how the newly reformed seventy-seventh class would impose despair on the world. Regular people being in despair was one thing, but her new Ultimate Despair would produce results not even she could fully calculate. That only caused the absolute excitement she was feeling right now to rise that much further.

"I understand," said Mukuro, who still looked unsure, "but in war, having numbers on your side could prove useful."

"War?" Junko turned and made eye contact with her sister. "I swear you're such a disappointment that you make me wanna slit my wrists. This isn't about war; it's about humanity breaking free of this false sense of harmony and embracing their basic instincts! Forget something as boring and predictable as war—this is the birth of a new world!"

Mukuro, who didn't have a meaningful reply, merely smiled at her sister's spirited and passionate
nature and said, "If you say so, Junko."

"Now, let's go to our classmates."

Like a whisper in the wind, a figure darted past Mukuro and shot straight towards Junko. The two siblings didn't even get to blink by the time the figure reached its mark. There was a knife held only mere centimeters from Junko's neck, and the culprit was a familiar face.

"What the—" began Mukuro, about to pull out her knife and rush the attacker. Before she could make a move—Junko held up her hand, signaling for her sister to back down.

"I'll catch up with you," said Junko, who had an expressionless face.

"But, Junko—"

"I said scram, you eyesore. The grown-ups are about to talk."

Despite her wanting to object, she knew arguing with Junko was pointless. If she wanted her to leave, there must've been a good reason. Mukuro sheathed her knife and proceeded to the main building where the rest of the seventy-eighth class was. Junko's mouth twisted into a smile while she flicked a strand of her blond hair.

"Getting past my bloodhound of a sister? Not bad…Chisa Yukizome."

"Thank you," replied the auburn-haired teacher, expressing a friendly smile while she was still holding the knife to Junko's neck. "You really should be kinder to your sister. Family values are important, you know?"

"Of course. The more valuable they are, the bigger the despair when you sever them."

"Are you planning on killing her?"

"Dunno; if I'm really bored or something."

"You truly are despair in human form."

"Like you have room to talk," began Junko, her smile growing wider, "or did you forget how you helped me take care of your beloved students?"

Chisa's expression didn't falter. "True enough." She proceeded to withdraw the knife. "I'm impressed. I came at you with a full killing intent, and you didn't flinch at all."

"Being afraid of death is so overrated. Besides, I knew you were there the whole time."

"Your analysis ability really is something special."

Junko raised an eyebrow before asking, "You figured that out?"

"I managed to put two and two together. It's ridiculous to think someone with the title of Ultimate Fashionista could be as prudent as you've proven."

"Good call. It makes me wonder if Ultimate Housekeeper is your real talent."

"What are your plans next?" asked Chisa as if she didn't hear Junko's last comment.

"I'm about to force a bunch of close friends to kill each other for no real reason other than my
amusement. You know, the usual."

"That sounds fulfilling."

"I know, right? I have all sorts of cool things planned like trials and executions. I'm still working on some of the details and kinks, but my time here let me test run a few things. Maybe if it all goes well, I'll even get approved for a sequel!"

"Well, good luck with that. As fun as it sounds, I'll be plenty busy on my end."

"...And my upperclassmen?"

"We just finished the ceremony. They're out and ready to become productive members of society."

"The real world can be a harsh place."

"They'll be fine; I'm their teacher, after all."

"Heh, and it's all thanks to her."

"I assume you're talking about that person you hate?"

"Hate?" repeated Junko, recalling a certain girl's face. "I don't hate her. As a result of her sacrifice, the seventy-seventh class was able to open their eyes and see things as I do. I give props to people who take one for the team. Hell, she took like twenty for the team! That day was one of the most entertaining days I can remember!"

"I see..." said Chisa. Her eyes narrowed while her smile persisted. "My first guess was right. If you don't hate her...you were obviously afraid."

That statement sent a strange sensation through Junko's head. Not even a second after that last word was uttered by Chisa, her smile vanished. "...What?" was all Junko said.

"I have a hypothesis about how your talent works. Say you had to choose between taking a right or left path. The way you'd like people to think your talent works is that you could predict each and every step that would lead to the more favorable outcome of turning left or right. However, I don't think that's how your talent works at all."

Chisa paused for a moment to see whether Junko would counter any of her previous statements. Instead, all she continued to get was a blank stare. After concluding she wasn't going to comment, Chisa continued with her explanation.

"How I think it works is when seeing the right and left path, while you have an idea of which choice would benefit you most, you don't really know what will happen in between. If you're at point A, you have a good idea whether point B or C will be the best for you. The only problem is the farther the points are from each other, the more variables get thrown into the mix."

"Your point?" asked Junko, finally responding.

"If you weigh a situation where you had to dodge a knife versus infiltrating a building, your talent's accuracy isn't the same. If everything I just said about your talent is right, it's one of your weaknesses."

"My...weaknesses?"

"One of two to be exact. I'm not too sure about the second as I am the first, but if I'm right about
that...it's your most fatal flaw. Also, it's a flaw that you of all people will never be able to fix."
Chisa kept gazing at Junko's indifferent face. "That's all just speculation, anyway."

It took a few awkward seconds before the next words were spoken.

"You know...I hate that smile," began Junko, her face twisting in disgust. "Variables? Weakness? Blah blah blah!" She started flapping her right hand like a ventriloquist would a puppet. "If I wanted boring ass lectures, I could've kept attending class instead of instigating this massive amount of death. What does anything you just said have to do with me being afraid?"

"Sorry, I kind of went off on a diatribe without meaning to. Although, the reason I think you were afraid and the way your talent works might not be unrelated."

"Then, get on with it!" demanded Junko, getting impatient. "Explain how Junko Enoshima could ever be afraid of some gamer nerd before I jump off this building from boredom."

"When you saw her for the first time, I believe three possibilities crossed your mind: you kill her immediately and be done with it, forcibly turn her into Ultimate Despair like Ikusaba did with me, or you keep her alive long enough to be useful. You went ahead with the third option and used her execution to trigger my students into becoming Ultimate Despair."

"I'm still not hearing the part where I was scared."

"...When you two first met—I believe there was one command your talent kept telling you that grew louder and louder... Chiaki Nanami must die." Instead of an unreadable expression, Chisa caught an extremely faint twitch of Junko's eye. "Oh...am I right?"

"How did you come to that dumb answer?" asked Junko, ignoring the previous question.

"You didn't hate Nanami, as you stated, and I assume that both of you had no previous history. The best option was to put her in a situation with no hope of survival, which is a method you hate because of how boring it is. You two are, without a doubt, complete opposites. Even if you didn't realize it, you felt an emotion you've never truly experienced before—fear. The reason being, Nanami could exploit your flaw."

She put her hands up like a professor dismissing their class. "That is my explanation on how Junko Enoshima could be afraid of the gamer nerd, as you put it. That's all I had to say."

There was another awkward silence between the despair loving women while the backdrop of death and pandemonium was still active. Everything Chisa said about Junko's talent and her motives for what she did to Chiaki was all put together using her deduction. She didn't know if anything she said was the absolute truth, but Junko's reaction was interesting in itself.

"Heh..." giggled Junko before she convulsed into a fit of laughter. She was tearing up while holding her sides. "Now I know Ultimate Housekeeper isn't your actual talent; it's the Ultimate Comedian! I mean, how else could such idiotic things ever be said! Since you're so interested, let me tell you something about your scary class rep."

All of a sudden, she pulled a complete one-eighty by halting her laughter and glaring daggers at Chisa.

"Ever since I was a kid, there has always been someone trying to stop me. Whether it was experienced detectives or people with talents, I always came out on top. While my legacy is going to be cemented as the greatest force the world has ever known, she will always be the girl I used to turn your students into Ultimate Despair. Now tell me, does Chiaki Nanami still sound like..."
"Your response is interesting…but I already gave you my opinion." There was a look of annoyance from Junko, who rolled her eyes. "It's not like it matters—she's passed away."

"…About that," began Junko, turning her back on Chisa and placing her hands on her hips. "This is a funny story: I set up that execution so when she gets impaled, it would avoid her vital spots. What I intended to do was use the last agonizing moments of her life to gloat for my amusement. Imagine my surprise when I found out the body had vanished without a trace? You wouldn't know anything about that…would you?"

Junko glanced behind her, seeing Chisa had already left. She realized this sooner but figured she'd humor herself and continue the monolog.

"That damn maid just wanted to hear how I'd respond to what she told me. Even if she wasn't all doped up on despair, there's nothing she could do. Now, I should get back to my sister before she screws something up. Seriously, it's tough being the smart sibling." Junko stretched out her arms while taking in the scene one more time.

"This despair is just getting started, after all!"

**VVV**

Chisa was strolling around Hope's Peak as if it was a lovely afternoon. The despair filling the air sent waves of pleasure throughout her entire body. Looking at the corpses of Reserve Course students and the destruction of the school was a more beautiful sight than she could've imagined. It was going to be important to maintain a low profile after this, so she took it in before having to depart. Right when she was passing the fountain, there was a surprising sight in front of her.

**Him?** she thought, looking at the artificially created Ultimate Hope, Izuru Kamakura. Upon inspection, all he seemed to be doing was staring at the fountain. What really caught her attention was an all too familiar object she caught a glimpse of in his hand. That's Nanami's hair clip. Why would he…

Like a jigsaw puzzle, she started to piece together what might've happened. She remembered rounding up all her students on the first day and meeting both Hajime and Chiaki at this spot. Chisa never looked into it much, but it was obvious the two had a close relationship before Hajime had his operation. The combination of Izuru holding her Gala Omega hair clip and his fascination with this spot made an idea pop up in Chisa's head.

Maybe Kamakura saw her dead body and part of Hajime slipped through the cracks? Kamakura, who was supposed to be perfect, might've been confused by the sudden emotions. Should I ask? She thought about it for a moment before deciding to confront him.

"They met here often," informed Chisa, approaching him. He slowly turned, looking at her with a cold gaze. "Do you remember?"

"While she was dying, her words confused me."

"By her, you mean Nanami, right?"

"Junko Enoshima would always say only in chaos and despair can unpredictability thrive," continued Izuru, who didn't bother answering the question. "However, after she said those words to me, I had a strange reaction… Tears started flowing on their own."
"Hmm," hummed Chisa, thinking of the best way to explain. "Nanami was someone important to Hinata and vice versa. Longing, affection, grief, love… Those are all imperfect things a perfect being like you was never made to comprehend."

Izuru changed his gaze from Chisa to the hair clip. The housekeeper didn't know if what she said registered with him. Trying to guess what he was thinking was like trying to grow another pair of arms. It was hard to grasp what thinking is to someone who's supposedly all-knowing.

Instead of a response, she watched as Izuru fished something from his pocket. Without looking, he flicked something at Chisa, who caught it between her fingers. It was just a plain, white envelope with no signature or insignia on it.

"What would this be?" she asked. "Not a love letter, I'm guessing."

"There are instructions inside that I made. After you arrive at the designated spot, you'll do the rest."

"What happens if I do something you don't want? I could even choose to ignore this."

"Upon observing you, I'm now sure," began Izuru, walking in the opposite direction, "you're the best choice for carrying out this task, Chisa Yukizome."

"My, would it be so bad if you gave an actual answer? At least tell me what it is you want. You certainly don't look like you're on the side of hope, but it also doesn't seem like despair has caught your interest either."

"What I want to see… is whether chaos or harmony can prevail in the end. Also—" He stopped walking suddenly. "—I want to see if the will that woman tried to destroy, can become something that can overtake her."

With those final words, Izuru departed to whatever destination he was headed next. Chisa was left alone while grasping the envelope. Not seeing a reason to ignore it, she opened the contents and examined the piece of paper inside. Upon looking at the contents, her eyes widened and a smile crossed her face.

If the Steering Committee wanted to create the perfect human, they might've succeeded. If what I'm thinking is correct, this will lead me to… Thinking about it no further, Chisa hastily departed to the appointed location.

VVV

How long does this go on for? Chisa slowly walked through the dark corridors located beneath the school. If it wasn't for the flashlight she had and the instructions Izuru made, traveling through all these dark twists and turns would be near impossible. There should be a door right around this corner.

Surely enough, there were two big doors she wasted no time opening and walking through. It would be pitch-black if it wasn't for the illumination from the flashlight, but she could still tell that the room was crowded with machines.

After a minute of searching the walls, she found the light switch. The housekeeper shielded her eyes the moment bright lights revealed some sort of laboratory. Not too far away was a large window that disclosed an empty room filled with a green glow.

This must be the place the Steering Committee experimented for the Izuru Kamakura Project. I
can't begin to imagine the atrocities they probably committed down here. Whole countries would kill to get their hands on this kind of technology.

Chisa walked over to the main computer terminal and inputted a series of commands, as instructed by Izuru's directions. The second she finished, she heard a loud sound turning out to be a large, futuristic machine rising out of the ground in the green room. Not wasting any time, she went to the machine and input more commands on the small control panel located on it. A long, slender pod opened and revealed something to Chisa that made her mind go blank for a moment.

"Unbelievable…" she muttered before tears started flowing down her face. "Managing to affect Kamakura and being fortunate enough to have the Steering Committee's equipment nearby…"

She warmly smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes. Then, like a lever being pulled, she sadistically grinned and quickly pulled out a knife. Her mouth was watered, fantasized about what she was going to do.

"Since you're in a coma, I'm sure you won't mind if I entertain myself, right?" She was about to let the despair flow when she put the knife to the unconscious person's skin. "Let's see how many things I can cut before you wake up!"

Before the cut was made, she froze because her excitement subsided.

It was replaced by a dim feeling in her chest and back of her head. She stared at the individual's face. It was then—an interesting picture formed in her mind. She put the knife back in her pocket before crossing her arms. The interesting picture became more vivid.

"So, this is what you meant, Kamakura? You knew I would come up with the idea I just had. I really can't believe how amazing he is." She took her hand and lightly felt the individual's face. From where she was standing, all the remnants of damage done could be seen.

"Rest while you can because I'm going to pull you from death's embrace. After that, I'm going to turn you into the image that's in my head right now. Actually, it's better to say I'm going to make you embrace the role I have planned. You'll be at my complete mercy. Big things are going to be expected from you, so make this fun for me, Nanami."

Chisa's sadistic smile returned when another idea crossed her mind. "…Perhaps, a better title would be…savior."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

Whew, the first chapter is done! This story is going to be canon-compliant for the most part. Bloom will mostly be my personal version and interpretation of how I feel the story could've gone. It starts canon from the fall of Hope's Peak and goes on from there. It'll also be pretty long—I'm certain since I already have all the arcs planned.

Despite me being "restrained by canon," it's still going to diverge pretty hard at the same time. There will probably be times you wonder how the heck that could fit in canon, but you'll see. Chiaki being in the Future Foundation might arise some complications if you think about it, but I already know how to make it work, hehe.
Anyway, thanks for being the beautiful people that you are and reading!
A young girl had her head resting on a desk in the middle of an empty classroom. Slowly, she lifted her head and scanned the barren room with her lifeless eyes. When it was certain no one was present, as usual, she looked down with a somber expression.

*Hope or despair… It's not a question I ever stopped and asked myself. All I've ever been able to do is play games. It's always been that way since I was a little girl. That's where things like this usually start.*

The scene shifted to a sunny afternoon in a small town. School had just let out, and all the kids were out hanging out with each other. Like a ghost, a five-year-old girl quietly passed through the crowd of loud voices with her jacket's hood up. She made her way through a small shopping district located in the middle of town. Every day, she would enter a quaint little restaurant owned by a middle-aged woman called Noriko, who would give her sweets after school.

"Chiaki," she greeted, brushing her short, black hair aside. "Alone again today?"

Chiaki was completely silent while she wore a dispirited expression. Noriko sympathetically smiled before removing her hood and patting her on the head.

"It's going to be hard to make friends if you don't open up more. Just try speaking a little, alright?" Noriko had a great idea when she remembered an order that came in today. "Want to see something neat? Take a look at that."

Noriko pointed to a machine at the corner of the store Chiaki had never seen before. It had different color buttons on it and a huge screen. It was decorated with stars and spaceships while giant words at the top read *Gala Omega*. Her eyes widened, wondering what the mysterious object could be.

"Since a lot of people bring their kids, I thought it was best to buy this arcade machine. You want to try?"

She had a look full of wonder when Noriko turned on the machine, making it roar to life. Her focus was completely on the arcade machine while images flashed across the screen and light tunes began playing.

"What is that?" asked Chiaki, finally speaking.

"It's a video game."

"A video game?"

"Just watch me." She gazed in amazement when Noriko popped in a coin and began playing. She only managed to play for a few minutes before all her lives were taken, but that was all the demonstration Chiaki needed.

"I'm, obviously, not that good; the objective of the game is to destroy all the enemy ships while also protecting yours."

"Can…I play?"

"Of course."
She hastily approached the game, almost like she was afraid it would grow legs and run away. A problem already presented itself when Chiaki desperately tried to stretch her body so she could reach the buttons. Noriko noticed and quickly retrieved a stool for her to stand on. Chiaki stood on the stool while holding her breath in anticipation. The words on the screen that kept blinking said, "Please insert coin."

"Get ready," informed Noriko, inserting another coin. "Don't feel bad if you lose. This game can be pretty hard if you don't…"

Noriko's voice trailed off because she witnessed Chiaki easily clear the first level of the game. Not only that, but she was plowing through multiple levels without losing a life. The levels were starting to get ridiculously hard, but Chiaki was like a robot because her hands and eyes were constantly moving at rapid speed.

Meanwhile, Chiaki herself wasn't thinking about anything except what her next move would be. Her eyes were glued to the screen while her brain and body were moving in perfect coordination. Throughout the whole ordeal—she was so entranced in the virtual space—she didn't blink a single time. Her determined look turned to one of disappointment when her last life was finally taken after an hour of playing.

"Wow…" began Noriko. "I was beginning to think we'd be here all night. Have you really never played a game before?"

"Nope," answered Chiaki, rubbing her eyes while entering letters next to her incredibly high score. "My eyes hurt."

"I would think so. It was like you were in another world. If you ask me…I'd say you have a natural talent for this type of thing." The shopkeeper looked at her for a moment while she pondered something. "I'll tell you what: since there's no school tomorrow, how about I show you a place filled with games just like this one?"

Her eyes became as big as saucers while her excitement grew again. She happily replied, "Yeah!"

That's where my love for games was born…or maybe it's better to say that's where I discovered it. After that, I would visit the arcade whenever I could and lose myself in whatever world I chose. It wasn't long until I set high scores in nearly every game I played. I even received some recognition for my ability as a gamer.

The scene changed to the inside of a stadium where the crowd was drawn into the current match between the champion five years running and the now twelve-year-old Chiaki. The tournament had tons of top players from all over the world competing in the hottest fighting game that year. She had been to a few tournaments before, but this was by far the biggest she had attended. Everyone was completely caught off guard when they saw a young girl crusade through the tough competition and face the champion.

The champion was a man in his early twenties that had played every game in the series. Everyone went into this tournament expecting him to win. It added to the disbelief of watching a twelve-year-old girl burst onto the scene and give the heavy favorite a good match. More than that—he was having trouble.

Finally, she dealt the finishing blow and the crowd let out a collective gasp.

"The winner of this year's tournament is…Chiaki Nanami!" yelled the announcer.
The crowd's cheers snapped Chiaki back to reality. She wanted to congratulate her opponent on the
good match, but he had already departed in a frustrated huff. It didn't matter because her attention
quickly shifted to the man who was approaching the stage. He was a key member of the company
that made the game featured in the tournament and creator of the original *Gala Omega*.

"That was a good show you put on," he said.

"T-thank you..." she stuttered. She was always a person of few words, but she could barely speak
right now. She wanted to give her opinion about the gaming industry and an analysis of how
modern games measured up to retro ones…but she figured that might be too much.

"For a young lady like you..." he began, handing her a cute and stylish pink backpack. "That's a
limited edition replica worn by the heroine from one of our games. Also," The man bent down and
whispered something in her ear, "since I know how much of a fan you are of my first game, we put
something a little extra in there."

Chiaki looked inside the backpack and found something at the bottom. What she saw made her jaw
drop—it was a pristine hair clip in the shape of the ship from *Gala Omega*.

"That's even more valuable than the backpack. There were only a few of these produced back when
the game first came out, making it a precious collector's item. It's sure to be worth a lot of money,
so don't take it out of the—"

His advice went up into smoke because Chiaki had already torn open the case and put the item in
her hair. There was a blush on her face while she decided to never take it off.

"Heh, never mind..."

_Thanks to my love for games, it let me see some amazing things. In fact, I was so good at games,
people figured it was the only talent I could've had. It began to shape my entire reputation..._

This time, the scene shifted to a classroom. It was early in the morning when Chiaki walked in
playing her Nantendo Game Girl Advanced—an act she did every day. She took her regular seat in
the back while a few girls noticed her.

"Look, it's the gaming otaku."

"Is messing with that stupid thing all she does? She'll never get anywhere in life wasting her time
on that."

"Careful. I heard that if you stare too hard, she'll invite you to play."

The girls started laughing among themselves while Chiaki kept playing her game. Her grades were
good, but the natural consensus among kids at her school was that she's nothing more than a
compulsive gamer. Comments flew around a lot: she'd never get a boyfriend, a shut-in like her was
useless, and similar accusations.

Normally, Chiaki would be too into what she was doing to notice that kind of gossip, but she knew
it existed.

After school, she walked to the arcade because it just installed a new game she was excited to play.
Upon arrival, there was already four boys playing it. Since it looked like they were having a fun
time, she was about to leave until she had an idea. "Um...do you guys want to play a round against
me?"
"That's fine by—" The boy halted his sentence when he saw her. All four of the boys looked at her with a weird expression. "Oh, uh…we wouldn't mind, but we're kinda out of quarters."

"I have some," informed Chiaki, pulling out a bag of coins.

"No, it's fine. It would be an odd number anyway, so you can go ahead and play."

Before she could get another word in, all of them walked away. She could vaguely hear them saying disparaging remarks about how unlucky they were or how unfair it would've been. With a stoic look, she put in a coin and proceeded to play the game by herself.

*Even after all that time, I was still the same little girl who'd walk home alone. I secluded myself so I didn't have to hear things like that anymore—maybe that was just an excuse I made so I wouldn't have to try. It didn't concern me; I had hundreds of different universes I could visit. So, it didn't matter if I was alone.*

This time, Chiaki walked into a tea shop because she was supposed to be meeting someone. One day, she received a letter of invitation. If the information was right, there should be a man waiting for her today. She looked around until she saw an older looking man in a suit and fedora waving at her by the window. It might sound like an odd situation out of context, but Chiaki already knew what this was going to be about.

"Hello, Mr. Kizakura," politely greeted Chiaki while bowing.

"You don't have to be so formal," replied Koichi. "Hope you don't mind I chose this place. It seemed like a proper enough setting."

"It's fine." She took the seat opposite of him.

"I'm Koichi Kizakura, and my main job at Hope's Peak Academy is to scout for promising young talent like yourself. Since you're the only one left that's undecided about whether you want to attend, I invited you here to see if I could persuade you a bit."

She narrowed her eyes. It was true that Hope's Peak Academy contacted her a while ago to let her know she was invited to attend. Her gaming prowess would earn her the title of Ultimate Gamer. Even someone like her, who never kept up with things other than games, knew how glorified and admired Hope's Peak was. To ninety-nine percent of the public, accepting the invitation was a dream come true. For Chiaki, however, there was still a dilemma.

"If you don't mind me asking, is there a specific reason you're hesitant to attend?" asked Koichi.

"…Hope's Peak Academy invited me because of my talent, right?"

"That's right."

"I've always loved playing games, but I never considered it a talent. I've never been able to make friends or be a beacon of hope to anybody. That's why…I don't think I belong in a place with talents that can actually help others."

Koichi pondered how he should approach this. Over his time scouting students, he ran into just about every kind of personality. He has run into kids similar to Chiaki before who, while loving what they do, didn't feel as if their talent could really do anything. "Do you regret being a gamer?"

"That's not true!" countered Chiaki, raising her voice louder than she intended. It was a habit for her to get overemotional when somebody criticized her love for games or the games themselves.
"I'll never regret playing games, but…"

"I see. You don't hate that you love games; you think your future has already been decided because it's your talent. In other words, you think you'll never be able to do anything that doesn't have to do with being a gamer."

Her silence was all the confirmation he needed. It was difficult to tell whether Chiaki was being pessimistic or just overly modest, but it was clear this was something she truly believed about herself. Koichi knew how to handle this.

"That settles it. You should definitely attend Hope's Peak Academy."

"Huh?" asked Chiaki with a confused look.

"I've seen kids with talents more ridiculous than you can imagine. Just like you, they thought they'd never be able to help anybody. After their tenure at Hope's Peak, each of them went on to help countless people thanks to their talent. Looking at your talent as a hindrance is a mistake. Look at it as a gift to be utilized in many different ways. You'll find that anything can be possible with good enough imagination. Just how many people have more potential in that department than the Ultimate Gamer?"

She tilted her head while still looking indifferent. Whatever true potential or creativity she could have was a total mystery to her. Still, she was sure Koichi knew what he was talking about because he did this type of thing all the time.

"Plus, who knows? You might discover a talent you didn't even know you had."

"It was a strange situation for me. Even though I liked games, I always thought since it was my talent—the future was already decided. But…what did I have to lose?"

Chiaki was now standing on the crest of Hope's Peak while looking at the actual building. It certainly looked impressive, but to her—it was just another school. After flipping her hood up, she walked through the front doors.

"I thought my classmates were noisy and annoying, at first. Shortly after, Ms. Yukizome told me using my talent could help with making friends. It never happened before, but I decided to give it one more shot and… it actually managed to work. For the first time, my talent helped me do something that wasn't just playing a game. It was also around this time that I started frequently visiting another friend I had."

Hajime was staring at the portable device in his hand with the utmost focus. As it stood, he had lost a total of nineteen straight matches to Chiaki today. However, he was neck and neck with her, and one more move would finally earn him the first victory that evaded him so. His palms were sweaty, and his arms were trembling while he waited for the crucial opening to appear. He held his breath when he saw the opening present itself

He missing completely.

"Damn," muttered Hajime, witnessing Chiaki deplete the rest of his health. He smiled a bit when the all too familiar loser graphic flashed. "All that hard work and I only have my twentieth straight loss to show for it."

"You had the right idea with that last move, but you should've done a weak attack instead of a strong one," informed Chiaki. "It's been a while since I had to focus that hard."
"I guess bringing out your full power is something to be proud of."

Ever since Chiaki embraced the idea of using her talent to reach out to others, she and Hajime started meeting after class. If they didn't feel like walking to the arcade, they would just come to the bench in front of the fountain and play whatever game they felt like on a portable system. Even though Hajime had no idea why an Ultimate like Chiaki would ever want to spend time with him, it turned out to be the most fun he's had in a long time.

"You seem happier lately," said Hajime.

"What makes you say that?"

"You smile a lot more. You were so unemotional when we first met, you could've passed for an android." Hajime laughed a little at his own comment, making Chiaki puff out her cheeks for a second.

"You're one to talk," replied Chiaki, staring at him with a serious expression. "Even when you're smiling, you always look sad about something."

She hoped he would actually talk this time, but he simply averted his eyes away from her. Whenever she would ask about anything personal, he would opt to not say anything. The look he had reminded her of the look she had when thinking about how her talent would cripple her in life. She wanted to help him like Chisa did for her, but she didn't want to pester him about it if he wasn't comfortable talking. Instead, she tried to think of something to lighten the mood.

"If you were a character in a game, what weapon would you want to use?"

Hajime was thrown off by the random question, but he soon understood it was her attempt to make him feel better. He put a finger to his chin while thinking about it and said, "I want one of those huge swords, like a character from a role-playing game."

"Oh," began Chiaki with a sigh, "that was a really typical answer, Hinata…"

Did she just tease me? he thought, raising his eyebrow. "Well, what would your amazing weapon be?"

"That's easy," replied Chiaki, looking at the sky. "I want a weapon that only I could use to its full potential. It would have a cool gimmick, so it would always come in handy."

"I should've guessed. That answer was very…you, after all."

After that conversation was done, the two sat in a peaceful silence. The calm water from the fountain was the only sounds they heard.

A minute later, it was Chiaki who broke the silence again when she asked, "You thought I was an android?"

"Maybe that was a bad example. How about an artificial intelligence from one of those science fiction movies?"

"I'm not an AI, probably. Although…being one might be unique in its own way. I've played some really good games where characters had that gimmick."

"You'd likely be able to do amazing things like manipulating the world, similar to data. You know, like the alien girl from that one anime? I can't think of the name…"
"I've done some pretty amazing things myself," she replied, breaking Hajime's train of thought. "One time, I visited a village and discovered a giant robot. It led to me and a few others having to win an impossible fight against a god. We managed to win, leading to a bright and free future for humanity."

"...Seriously?"

"Yep, that was an awesome game. It's a shame it never received a sequel."

Hajime paused for a moment before heartily laughing. It wasn't her intention at first, but Chiaki found herself doing the same.

_Sadly, my time with Hinata was short. As quick as we had met, he disappeared. He promised he'd come again the next day, but no matter how long I waited...he didn't come. Maybe he was avoiding me like all those people did before..._ 

_I didn't think I deserved it, but everyone made me the class representative. The death of Kuzuryu's sister and Koizumi's friend occurred, and Komaeda got suspended while Ms. Yukizome was reassigned to the Reserve Course building. It looked bad; however, I promised Ms. Yukizome I'd keep everyone together._

_I used all of my experience playing games to plan fun activities for the whole class. It wasn't easy, I didn't even get to play any games for a long time, but it paid off. It's because of them accepting me for who I was, that I was able to work hard. Even though Ms. Yukizome and Komaeda weren't with us, and I still never saw Hinata again—things were going so well._

...Maybe it was fate those fun times wouldn't last.

_Strange events led me to a secret passage where I met...her. I also met Hinata again—he didn't recognize me. I managed to escape because of Ms. Yukizome. I know she wanted us to run away...but I couldn't abandon her. It might've been easier for me to leave and get away from the danger; however, if I left the person that said there's more to me than my talent—I would've never forgiven myself._

_So, I advised my entire class left to rescue her. Now that I think about it, that's probably where it was all over for me. Junko completely caught me in her trap...and it was game over. I don't even know whether to call it an ending at all._

The scene shifted back to the empty classroom like it was at first. Her devoid eyes stared straight ahead while she sat up.

...What was it all for, I wonder? I tried my best to be what Ms. Yukizome said I could be—I really did. No matter how many fantasy worlds I would get lost in, I could never escape reality. 

Everything those kids and Junko said about me is true. Even with my ability to play games, I'm nothing...

She looked down while maintaining her deadpan expression. Those memories were the only things she had now. Her existence was closing her eyes and waking up in the same barren classroom. She didn't know if this was a dream or if this was what the afterlife really was. Telling how much time had passed was impossible because the clock always pointed at eleven fifty-nine.

"It's all," began Chiaki, talking to nobody, "pointless..."

"Now, is that the attitude I taught you to have?" asked Chisa, appearing out of nowhere. She stood in front of the class with an expression that made it seem like she was angry. "That kind of talk
doesn't sound like the Nanami I know. You managed to do more than you thought your talent would let you, right?"

Chiaki didn't even bat an eye at her teacher's sudden appearance while she said, "None of it mattered in the end." Chiaki blocked her ears with her palms, slowly shaking her head. "What's the point when—"

"Haha, you nobody!" shouted a familiar female voice that made Chiaki's whole body freeze. When she looked again, her teacher had vanished. Instead, there was the blond-haired woman in front of her desk, gazing down at her with a cocky expression. "You're classmates are mine now, Nanami."

"Junko..." muttered Chiaki, staring at the fake fashionista with an expression that was both phlegmatic and powerful. The classroom and the floor started cracking as like an earthquake was happening.

"It's about time," chimed Junko, looking around. "I thought you'd never snap out of limbo. Heh, even though this is all in your mind—you really look like you hate me."

Chiaki continued to stare at Junko with that same intense expression, which only seemed to be amusing the mastermind.

"Can you reach me? Will we ever meet again? Is it possible for you to obtain an ending that doesn't result in your demise, courtesy of me? Strangely enough, I'm actually looking forward to it." Junko's smile widened while the stationary clock finally hit twelve. "Oh...and no hard feelings?"

Chiaki's senses left her before everything went dark.
It wasn't Chiaki's intention to wake up screaming, but it happened, regardless. The moment she opened her eyes, in what looked to be a hospital room, hundreds of feelings hit her at once.

It felt like nothing would be okay again.

Memories of the past flowed through her mind as the pain and hopelessness she was feeling were overwhelming. Multiple tubes were coming out of her, and she had an oxygen mask on.

"Oh my god!" yelled a man, barging into the room. "She's awake!"

Instantly, a pale-haired woman wearing a black mask ran in. The man held Chiaki down before the woman stuck a needle in her arm and injected something.

"You're alright now, Nanami," informed the woman in a calm voice. "Just relax, and we'll take care of you."

The terror that was attacking her seemed to fade away. Her eyes became heavy while her head fell back onto the pillow.

VVV

Chiaki slowly opened her eyes, not making a sound this time. Her body felt strangely warm and light as a cloud. The last thing she remembered was a woman injecting something in her arm. She turned left to look at nothing but a window showing a murky sky. When the gamer turned her head right, a unique sight was waiting for her.

"Yay! You're finally awake!" cheered what appeared to be a pink and white rabbit on a computer monitor.

A normal person might've been flabbergasted to see this, but Chiaki was more interested in the woman behind the monitor. She had dark-bluish hair along with a large red scarf that covered the bottom part of her face, and she was sitting in a wheelchair. While her eyes looked impassive, Chiaki could feel a strange warmth and gentleness when she looked into them.

"I'm sure you have a million questions, so fire away!"

"Why is there an animal speaking to me?" she asked. A better question would've been about her location or what was going on, but that was the first question to pop into her head.

"Hehe, I didn't think that would be your first question. The name of this avatar is Usami. The controller is the woman you see behind the monitor. I'm the former Ultimate Therapist and head of the Seventh Division of the Future Foundation, Miaya Gekkohara." Miaya blinked once as if that was her way of saying hello.

"Future…Foundation?"

"We're an organization led by Hope's Peak alumni to combat the rise of despair and save the world from the current catastrophe."
"What?" asked Chiaki, confused by that last part. "The world was just fine yesterday."

"Oh my..." muttered Usami with a troubled expression. "You weren't awake when it happened; the world is completely different than you remember."

She had no clue what Miaya could be talking about. She looked out the window again to see if there was any noticeable change. At first, she didn't think anything of the bleak, foreboding sky—but she wondered if it had ever looked like that before.

"...How long was I unconscious?"

"Well...the exact time is unknown, but you've been in a coma for at least a month."

It felt like something out of the games she would play. She had been in a coma for over a month, and the world had been destroyed by despair. While she kept wondering why any of this was happening, one face popped up in her mind. Junko, she thought. The memories of her final day came rushing back to her. She grabbed her head because the unpleasant recollection was plaguing her.

"Don't force yourself to remember something your mind can't handle! The medicine you're on right now helps against anxiety attacks, but you still need to be careful!"

Back then, I died... didn't I? For the first time since waking up, she examined herself. She was wearing a hospital gown, and nearly every part of her body was covered in bandages. Her form looked skinnier, and her hair easily reached past the shoulders now.

"You had grievous injuries over your entire body. The worse one was just below your neck. Miraculously, not only did you live, but when your body was brought here—most of the wounds were already closed." Miaya proceeded to hand the gamer a small mirror.

She looked deathly pale, and her eyes looked devoid of life while bags were visible under them. Her treasured Gala Omega hair clip was also nowhere to be found. There was a scar above her right eyebrow that was mostly concealed behind her bangs, and a patch of her bangs looked slightly different from the normal shade. She realized her body was covered in a multitude of scars under the bandages. She put the mirror aside and looked out the window again.

It's like she woke up from a nightmare, only to land in another one—this was her new reality.

Chiaki had played countless games where the villain's goal was world domination. Junko managed just that by destroying the world with despair. Not to mention her friends were gone and doing who knows what. It was a surreal situation going from hanging out with your close friends, from being lucky to be breathing.

"I know it seems bleak," began Usami, "but please remember happiness can always be found for those who look for it."

"..." She felt empty right now. In her mind, if she'd been stronger back then, she could've stopped Junko and prevented all of this.

Miaya, being a world-class therapist, could easily read the pain in Chiaki's expression. She made Usami ask, "Is it okay if we casually address each other?" Chiaki nodded without looking up.

"Chiaki, do you know why I was chosen to be the one to greet you after waking?"

"Why?"
"Hehe, well I am the former Ultimate Therapist, silly! After I discovered your case, I knew you would be severely traumatized. So, until I declare you healthy enough, you're my patient!"

It was odd how even though Miaya herself wasn't saying a word, there was a certain strength behind what she'd make Usami say. Chiaki was doubtful she could ever really be happy again, but she still felt a faint reassurance upon looking at Miaya. She guessed it was probably an effect of being the Ultimate Therapist.

"Okay," replied Chiaki. "Thank you, Miaya."

Almost on cue, there was a knock on the door. Whoever it was must've been important because Miaya exited the room after she saw them.

A few seconds later, she returned and cheerfully said, "There's wonderful news! You have a visitor I'm sure you'll be overjoyed to see! I'll step out for a bit and leave you two alone, alright?"

"Alright."

She didn't have a clue who'd want to visit her. Miaya left the room once more, and somebody began to step in. It might've been her imagination, but Chiaki could've sworn time slowed down the moment she saw her visitor's face. It was a face she grew to love and admire during her time at Hope's Peak—now it was a face that made her whole body tremble in fear.

"M-Ms. Yukizome…?" muttered Chiaki.

"So you woke up after all," began Chisa, sporting the same mischievous smile she had back then, "my darling little cinnamon roll."

The dark memory of the despair-crazed teacher sending her off to a brutal death in that elevator struck her like lightning. She was about to scream for Miaya to save her from whatever terrible thing she was going to do.

Swiftly, Chisa closed the door and launched towards Chiaki's bed before clamping a hand firmly over her mouth. She pulled out a syringe and pointed it directly toward the gamer's neck; her smile persisted while she gazed into the terrified expression of her former student.

"The room does not have a camera," began Chisa. "This syringe contains a poison that will knock you out and eventually kill you. By the time they find out the cause of death, I will have already destroyed any evidence leading to me. So I'm sure you understand I'm risking nothing by killing you right here. If you're ready to be the good student I know you are and listen to your teacher, blink once please."

Chiaki, seeing no other way out of this, blinked once as instructed. Chisa removed her hand and pulled up a chair next to her bed. Fear paralyzed the gamer because she was afraid of what might happen. The nice and gentle woman that helped her break free from a shell of solitude just threatened to kill her as naturally as one might use the restroom. Her heart felt like it stopped when she saw Chisa pull out a knife.

"Relax," assured Chisa, pulling out a red apple. Like this was some normal teacher-student conversation, she started to peel the apple. "Let me explain how this is all going to work. You and I are going to have a little chat. If you try to resist—you die. Do we have an understanding?" Chiaki didn't answer. "…Do you understand?"

The sinister rise in Chisa's voice scared her. "Y-yes…"
"Good. Now, I'm going to explain what happened, what's happening right now, and what's going to happen in the near future. If you get lost or confused, just let me know, okay?"

"Yes…"

"I'm sure you remember Junko Enoshima. After she executed you, that became the catalyst for your classmates turning into Ultimate Despair. I had already been converted by means of lobotomy. For her amusement, Junko made sure your death wouldn't be instant. That gave Izuru Kamakura the window to place your body in the machine he was operated on with."

"Izuru Kamakura?"

"You know—Hajime Hinata. After he was changed by the Steering Committee, that's the name they gave him. Izuru Kamakura, the artificially created Ultimate Hope."

"Why would he do something like that…?"

"You should know better than me. The Izuru Kamakura Project's main goal was to turn a talentless person into a being filled with countless talents. If he voluntarily agreed to participate in something that extreme, he must've truly despised what he was. It could be that upon meeting you, his desire to have a talent so he could be the same might've been the deciding factor for him."

Chisa was maintaining her friendly smile while Chiaki narrowed her eyes. All those months of Hajime's disappearance suddenly fit. Thinking back, that day he said he had something to do might've been the moment it was decided. She began thinking if she would've pushed harder or understood quicker, he could've changed his mind. It didn't matter to her in the slightest whether he was a Reserve Course student.

He would always have that sad look…thought Chiaki, who probably would've started crying from this whole ordeal if it wasn't for her fear of Chisa. Is that…really my fault too?

"Kicking yourself over what happened is pointless. For people like Hinata, it's not a matter of if it's going to happen—but when." She was still peeling the apple.

"Anyway, Kamakura helped you by planting your body in that machine. I won't bore you with a bunch of scientific and medical terms, so I'll paraphrase by saying the machine managed to supercharge your body's ability to heal and stabilize. However, due to the massive amount of trauma and the energy your body devoted to the healing process, you went through a long period of stasis. Do you follow so far?"

Chiaki nodded before Chisa continued.

"A lot of small things happened while you were unconscious. Junko instigated the mass genocide of the Reserve Course, and Hope's Peak Academy was closed. The Biggest, Most Awful, Most Tragic, Event in Human History transpired, which was basically tons of people falling into despair and tearing the world apart. That led us into forming the Future Foundation to fight against the Despairs. That's about all."

…How was any of that small?

"Thanks to Kamakura, I recovered your body and brought you here."

"You didn't kill me…?"

"We'll get to that soon. I'm head of the Fifth Division, so I used my influence to get you the best
treatment possible. Your life was saved through the combined efforts of Kamakura and the Future Foundation. They were considering pulling the plug and letting you go. However, just a few hours ago…you woke up and returned. Now, you're all caught up."

"…" Chisa looked at Chiaki like she was expecting some kind of question or reaction, but she was quiet as a mouse.

"There was a fair amount of luck involved, and even I started to doubt whether you'd wake up…but here we are. Putting it in terms the former Ultimate Gamer is sure to understand: it's like you found another life and was able to continue."

She laughed a little while her joke failed to get any response out of her distressed former student. After she finished peeling the apple, she cut it into four symmetrical slices. She offered Chiaki a slice, which she refused, before eating it herself.

"That Bandai sure knows what he's doing," commented Chisa, enjoying the fruit. "Now, let's get to what's happening now. In regards to your former classmates—Ultimate Despair—they've scattered across the globe. I would tell you some of the things they've done, but let's just say murder is one of the more tame acts they've committed."

It was a good thing Chiaki was still being influenced by the medicine because she felt another anxiety attack coming on. Imagining the kind faces of her friends doing things like killing people was something she never would've imagined in her wildest dreams.

"Kamakura is out doing whatever super-talented people like him do. As for Junko, she's gone quiet for now, but it probably won't be long until she makes her next move. The only people who know the full truth about Junko, Hinata, and the seventy-seventh class, is me and you. Well…there is one more person, but you don't need to worry about that."

Chisa took a huge bite out of the next slice of apple. "These are so juicy and delicious. Seriously, you should try one of these." Chiaki rejected the offer again. "More for me."

Observing her teacher was akin to watching a psychopath from a murder mystery story. She was completely out of her mind and willing to murder anybody she had to with that same smile on her face. Yet, here she was informing her of the actions of her psychotic friends and the broken state of the world in a nonchalant manner.

"Lastly, it's time to talk about what's going to happen. You asked me why I didn't kill you. Truth is, while the thought of it excited me greatly, a much better idea crossed my mind."

Chiaki's heart skipped a beat because she interpreted those last words as Chisa doing something much worse than what happened last time. If she was going to get tortured and killed anyway, the gamer figured she had nothing to lose by screaming for someone.

She was a second from doing it until a knife flew so close to her face, she could hear it slice through the air. The knife buried itself in the opposite wall; Chiaki might as well be encased in a block of ice.

"Oh, Nanami," began Chisa, still smiling, "you were about to break our agreement, weren't you?" Chisa slowly stood and walked towards the wall where the knife was. "You just woke up from a coma after having something horrible happen to you. It would be absurd to think your emotions aren't all over the place right now, so I understand. Please don't put me in a position where the only way I can make sure you don't do something stupid is cutting out your tongue, alright?"
"AAlright …" quickly agreed Chiaki, who didn't dare test her patience.

"What I meant by having something better planned doesn't include me mutilating you. I have a certain plan that only works as long as you're alive. I'm going to paint you into a much more fitting image."

"What image?"

"Junko Enoshima is an individual that's engulfed herself in despair; I want you to become the complete opposite."

"You mean…hope?"

"Not at all. You might not realize, but you and Junko are already the opposites of each other as human beings. I don't need you to embody hope… I need you to be Junko Enoshima's antithesis. A person that doesn't preach hope or ask for it, but rather a person who can draw hope to them and not be dictated by it; a person that mankind can bet the future on." Chisa stuck out her arms while wearing a strangely enthusiastic expression. "You will become…the savior!"

"H-huh?" She was utterly confused.

"Think about it. The tragic human that fell by the hands of pure evil, only to rise from the dead and lead humanity to a bright future as the savior. I'm going to make it my personal agenda to make you into someone worthy of that title."

If this wasn't crazy before, it certainly was now. Chisa's real motives were a complete mystery, but here she was telling the gamer that she'll make her into a weapon against Junko while clearly being on the side of despair. Chiaki could've asked why she wanted to do this, but the gamer had a different response ready.

"I don't wanna," she plainly stated.

"...Excuse me?" asked Chisa while her smile disappeared.

"Savior? I've never been able to do anything. How can I be the savior when I couldn't save a single one of you? Everything went wrong when I tried to be something I'm not. So, whether it's hope or despair… I'm done. Even though I know this makes me a coward, if it meant not having to deal with all this pain—I wish I never agreed to attend Hope's Peak Academy…"

Chiaki knew it was disrespectful to her friends, with whom she formed warm memories with over that period of time, but these were her feelings right now. She truly loved her friends, but she was utterly exhausted in just about every way a human could be. It wasn't until she had finally formed bonds with others that it all fell apart. Even if it meant staying alone, it seemed preferential to what the outcome of attending Hope's Peak turned out to be.

"Geez, you're so depressing," said Chisa, walking to her bed. She grabbed Chiaki's chin and forcibly turned her head toward her. "You misunderstood, Nanami. This is what I've decided, so you get no say in the matter. The reason you're breathing is that I still have a use for you. Meaning—your life belongs to me from this point on."

"T-that's…"

"Ah ah, no arguments. This is what I think is best."

"But, why?" asked Chiaki while breaking her chin out of Chisa's grip. "Why would you want me to
become a threat to despair? Isn't despair what you want?"

"I can't tell you all my intentions yet. I came up with an interesting scene in my head, so now I'm planning and improvising to build around that scene and reach the ending I want."

Chisa hugged Chiaki's body close to her own. Chiaki could feel her skin crawl when the demented housekeeper embraced her so casually. However, she wasn't foolish enough to shove her away.

"We're going to be seeing each other a lot now, so let's be as friendly as possible. Let's be like sisters. You can even call me your mom if you'd like; we were always like a mother and daughter."

The gamer didn't respond to anything Chisa said. Chiaki didn't care how people addressed her, but she was certain she would never refer to the current Chisa Yukizome as her mother.

"Some last notes. You can never tell anyone about Junko, Izuru Kamakura, or the fate of our class. If anybody asks, you were taken as a hostage and tortured by Reserve Course students after walking to your dorm alone. That's all you need to say."

Chisa broke the embrace and walked towards the door. Having her farther away was an instant relief for Chiaki's nerves.

"Also, if you get any ideas about secretly telling someone what we just discussed, you'll be punished. It doesn't take a genius to figure out whether people will believe the head of the Fifth Division and leader of gathering intelligence—or a traumatized, mentally unstable gamer. I have more influence in the Future Foundation than you can imagine. Hehe, I can thank my darling Kyosuke for that."

Even if Chiaki wanted to speak against Chisa, she didn't know how to do it. It was true she was just some gamer that was lucky to be alive, and Chisa was an adored Hope's Peak alumni. It was another sad fact she'd have to accept—she was at the complete mercy of Chisa now.

"We'll begin your transformation after your convalescence is taken care of. Make sure you listen to the doctor's orders and be nice to Gekkogahara. She might seem odd, but she really is a sweet woman. Also, I managed to salvage your belongings from your dorm, so your games and clothes are in storage."

There it was. Saving her stuff was a genuinely nice act that was totally different from her actual personality now. Chisa was about to walk out until Chiaki had one last thing to say.

"Is there any of the old Ms. Yukizome left?" There was a brief silence before she answered.

"You see me standing here, don't you? Bye now."

Chisa finally exited the room, leaving Chiaki to the solitude she was accustomed to. Everything she was just told was overwhelming to take in, but she had no choice. She might be alive, but things were about to get tremendously harder. While she wasn't sure what Chisa was aiming for, Chiaki was sure of something. There was no doubt the Chisa Yukizome that helped her change into a different person—died a long time ago.
I'm so glad I get to use the nice therapist. Hopefully, I can be as in-depth and deep as her character in the anime(sarcasm).
"Is that the girl I heard about?" asked Usami, commanded by Miaya.

"Yes," answered Chisa. "She's my former student."

"According to the report you gave, Yukizome," began Kyosuke, "she had injuries that suggest impalement through multiple parts of her body. Her wounds were synonymous with that of torture."

"I found her body abandoned after the school shut down. If I had to guess, it was a group of rampaging, jealous Reserve Course students."

"…" Miaya stared at the window they were in front of. The trio was observing the unconscious body of Chiaki, who became an interesting topic of discussion in the Future Foundation. Not only was the girl who should be dead still living, but her wounds were closed. It was a strange case that nobody had been able to crack.

"You said her wounds were already closed when you found her?" asked Kyosuke.

"It was shocking to see. Despite what must've happened, she was still barely clinging to life. I can't even comprehend what the poor thing must've gone through. If only I was a better teacher…" Chisa had a sad expression while Kyosuke made one of his rare sympathetic looks.

"Nobody could've predicted what would happen, Yukizome. It's not your fault."

"A-alright… Thank you." Chisa had to bite her tongue to keep herself from bursting out into laughter. You're just too easy, Kyosuke.

"What will happen to her now?" asked Usami.

"As Chisa requested, we're doing all we can to keep her alive. However, if she continues to show no signs of waking…we'll be forced to take her off life support."

"What!" yelled Chisa, frustrated. "You're just going to let her die? Chairman Tengan authorized this, so…"

"Tengan authorized that we assist in sustaining her life on the grounds she has a chance of awakening. The only reason she's alive is the machines and medicine. Sorry, Yukizome, but we can't afford to waste valuable resources on someone who's already dead." Kyosuke walked away, leaving Chisa feeling annoyed.

Shit, she thought. I was hoping I'd be able to keep holding him off. Honestly, even I'm starting to doubt whether Nanami will ever wake up. Did you miscalculate, Kamakura?

"Yukizome," began Usami, "do you mind notifying me when she wakes up?"

"Huh?" Chisa turned to Miaya while putting her friendly face back on. "What for?"

"If she wakes up, the mental damage that's been done is unavoidable. I would like to take her on as my patient."
How fortunate. I figured I'd just instill enough fear in Nanami to scare her straight. Having Gekkogahara work on her is a much better alternative. I suppose there is a risk Nanami might tattle on me, but...I can't pass this up.

"You're such a sweetheart, Gekkogahara!" cheered Chisa while softly grasping Miaya's small hands in her own. She retracted her grip when she saw how red the therapist was. "Oh, sorry. I forget how shy you are. Anyway, it'd be wonderful if you could help her. I just hope it doesn't get in the way of your work."

"That will be no problem for me!" happily said Usami, which was weird because Miaya still looked embarrassed.

"I'll let the whole medical ward know to notify you when Nanami wakes up. I think you'll take a real liking to her. Me being her former teacher and all, I think you two are alike."

"Really?" Miaya could only guess what she meant. "It would be a big help if you could tell me everything you know about her."

"Oh, of course! I just have one request."

"What is it?"

"After you introduce yourself, let me say a few words to her. There's a special...welcoming I want to give her. I'll leave the rest in your capable hands after that."

"I'm sure she'd love it! Seeing your face will certainly trigger a strong, positive reaction."

"I'm sure it will..."

VVV

That conversation transpired about a week after Chiaki's body was brought in. It was at the same time the current Future Foundation was officially established, and all the division leaders had been assigned. It was disturbing to think how close Kyosuke was to ordering Chiaki to be removed from life support.

It took only a second for Miaya to notice the mental trauma the former Ultimate Gamer was under. She had dealt with some insane cases in her career, but this one felt like uncharted waters for some reason.

"That should last you throughout the day," informed Seiko, administering the daily dose of medicine. "If you start feeling any pain, let me know."

"Okay," answered Chiaki with the same somber expression she wore all the time now. "Your medicines are really great."

It was hard to tell because of the mask, but Seiko smiled when she heard the praise for her work. "It's nothing really. See you tomorrow!" She was skipping while exiting the room.

"As you could tell, Kimura loves it when people praise her work," informed Usami. "She'll probably be in a good mood for the rest of the day."

"I didn't notice."

"Hehe, my mistake."
The daily therapy sessions had been going on for two days now. From noon to dusk, Miaya would try and have a conversation about anything Chiaki wanted to talk about. She didn't want to tackle the main root of whatever the problem was yet, so she settled with some small talk. Even that was proving to be difficult because the only things she'd ever do was play her game or absentmindedly stare at the floor.

There was another interesting subject that caught Miaya's attention.

"You never told me what you and Yukizome talked about." It lasted for only a moment, but Miaya could see the faintest twitch of the gamer's eyelids.

"We didn't really talk about anything..." she answered.

Throughout her tenure as a therapist, that kind of change in expression was synonymous with an unpleasant memory. In total, the subject of Chisa had come up three times. Every time it did, Chiaki would react how she just did. The way Chisa described their relationship made them sound extremely close. If Miaya knew nothing about their relationship prior to this, she would have assumed the two had a bad history with each other.

*It could be thinking of her teacher made the memories of her classmates appear, and that's where the reaction came from. Should I push this subject now? No. Until I get a better picture of what happened—I can't risk her relapsing. I should change the subject.*

"You must've been really happy to see your belongings survived."

"Yeah."

Another problem was Chiaki would opt to give short answers whenever she could, making it hard to carry a conversation. Miaya would have to direct in a way that would make Chiaki answer more thoroughly, but she also couldn't make her feel pressured to talk.

"Was there anything that didn't make it? Maybe a piece of jewelry or a memento?"

She tugged on a strand of her hair before answering. "I had a *Gala Omega* hair clip that I would always wear."

*A special item? I can use this. *Gala Omega,* you say? Isn't that an old arcade game where you'd have to shoot enemy spaceships?"

"You've played it?" Chiaki slightly widened her eyes while she looked up for the first time today. Based on Chisa's explanation, the only thing that would truly get a rise out of her was games. It made complete sense with her being the former Ultimate Gamer and all. However, the only reaction talking about games the current Chiaki would give was a faint interest. Luckily, Miaya wasn't a novice in the gaming department.

"I'm certainly not as skilled as you, but I would play video games a lot when I was younger. In fact, playing games are what first interested me in computers and programming. I never mentioned it, but my main job in the Future Foundation is cybersecurity."

"So games let you discover a talent that was really useful...unlike me."

"You don't think your talent is useful?"

There was no response.
Miaya recalled something Chisa mentioned. Chiaki never thought too much of her talent—but it was because of that talent, she was able to make her class get along.

I wanted to avoid any topic dealing with her class...but she's starting to open up a little more now. Maybe I should —

"Why did you become a therapist?" asked Chiaki, breaking Miaya's train of thought.

"Hmm?"

"You were able to make a fully interactive avatar like Usami, and you're in charge of cybersecurity. If you're so talented with technology, why did you become a therapist?"

"Hehe, so you want to talk about my backstory? Let's see... I guess it's because of a bridge I used to live by."

"A bridge?"

"When I was in middle school, I was silent all the time. It wasn't because I was being bullied or anything; I'm not really a speaker. As a result, I always find myself listening."

"You helped other kids at your school with their problems?"

"I would sometimes, but Hope's Peak Academy found me because of a job I had. There was a bridge famous for being an area lots of people would come to commit suicide. So one day, I was walking home when I spotted a middle-aged businessman about to jump. He had lost everything, and his wife had left him. When it looked like he was finally going to jump, I approached."

"...Did you save him?"

"All I did was listen and say whatever came to mind. I ended up convincing him not to go through with it after almost an hour. The authorities then took him to get the proper help he needed. Everyone was so impressed with me being able to help that man, I was offered a job. Can you guess what it was?"

"They would ask you for help if anyone was going to jump?"

"Correct. It was kinda like I had my own special hotline or something. Whenever someone was going to jump, they would stall long enough for me to get there and talk to them. People who couldn't afford a real therapist would come to the bridge for a chance to meet the legendary kid therapist. I guess because of me, that bridge ended up becoming famous for another reason. I'm not sure about the exact number, but I had saved over forty people from jumping; there was never one person that jumped when I was there."

"But, instead of hanging out with friends, you had to deal with people that were ready to give up on life. Wasn't it hard?"

How can I say this? "Despair is a truly unfair thing. It's incredibly easy to find, but really hard to get rid of. That makes it all the more special when an individual is able to leave despair and turn towards the future. That moment when I see a person who's lost all hope, and I inspire them to live on—it's indescribable. I believe all life is special, so I truly do love helping people see there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

"..." Chiaki was silent while she looked down again.
"It does get pretty hard, as you said. I've dealt with young children and people with a short time to live. It would be easier to just forget about them and move on, but I carry them all with me regardless of the pain." Chiaki made a surprised expression, which told Miaya that her last statement earned attention.

"Can I ask you another question, Miaya?"

"Of course, silly! You can ask me anything!"

"You said that...you would carry all those memories with you, even if it hurt to think about those people."

"You betcha!"

"...What if something happened to one of those people—something bad? What if there was something you could've done about it if you were stronger?"

She's talking about herself. What could she be referring to? Maybe her classmates or family? I need to tread carefully.

"Can you explain what you mean by stronger, please?"

"If people you cared about were hurt, and no matter how hard you tried...you knew you'd never be able to stop it because you're too weak. Even though you might've enjoyed those bonds, they make you suffer when they're destroyed. That's too much, right?"

I still can't tell whom she's referring to. She's making a conscious effort to not tell me the exact details. The last thing I want to do is turn this into an interrogation. I'll answer honestly, and hope she tells me the truth on her own.

"That's an understandable stance to take. It's true when you open yourself up to bonds, you risk the pain of having them broken. Being afraid or ashamed of being weak is common."

"So, you agree it's better not to—"

"Now, I'm not saying that. Life itself is a huge gamble. I get wanting to be alone sometimes or not talking much—I've always been like that. However, avoiding other people because you're afraid you'll get hurt, or because you think you're weak, is by no means a solution. You'd be better off living in a bubble on a deserted island in the middle of nowhere."

"Then, what should you do if those bonds do get broken?"

"That's up to you to decide. You can endure or move on, but you can never give up and run away. Those that make an effort, even if it ends up failing, are truly the strong ones. Like you, Chiaki."

"I-I'm not strong..." she murmured, looking away.

I think I pushed a little farther than I should've with that last part. Although, she does seem more relaxed now.

The hours that passed afterward was pretty uneventful. Miaya would ask simple conversation starters, like what her favorite foods were. She was hoping to make a bit more progress on what they were talking about earlier, but she knew this was a process that needed to be slow and steady. Fortunately, this was all moving along faster than she thought it would. Still, there was a feeling she had because she sensed something was missing. There was a certain factor that didn't fit.
"Looks like our time is up," notified Usami, after Miaya checked the time. "Good work today!"

"Thanks."

"Until tomorrow!"

Miaya departed the room and was met with the smiling face of Chisa waiting further down the hallway. The way she was leaning against the wall made it obvious she'd been waiting for the therapist to appear.

"Did you want to talk to her?" asked Usami.

"I had some spare time, so I'd thought I'd get an early progress report if that's okay."

"She always has a lot on her mind. The biggest problem I can see so far is depression and pessimism. Also, the way she talks makes it seem like there was an event that happened where someone was hurt because of her."

"Oh? Could it be related to our class? Even I still feel horrible about how I failed to help them. With her being the class rep, she probably feels the same way I do."

"There's something else I noticed…"

"What would that be?"

Miaya was about to tell her, but that same feeling she had from before kept her from speaking. She wanted to tell her about Chiaki's reaction every time her name was brought up. Until she knew exactly what it meant, she didn't want to mention it.

"It's something I feel I should keep to myself for now. I wouldn't want to worry you about something that could mean nothing."

"That's fine—confidentiality and all that. If you need my help with anything, just let me know."

Chisa left, leaving Miaya alone in the barren hallway. I've dealt with many different cases. So, what's this weird feeling I keep having? I can tell Chiaki certainly isn't a bad person, but it feels like she's hiding an important fact. I guess I'll know more as the rehabilitation goes along.

VVV

Chiaki had always considered herself to be a night owl. She was never a big fan of waking up early and staying up until dawn was no problem. It was for that reason, she could lay completely motionless and stare at the ceiling despite it being midnight. She was feeling restless, and she—shockingly—didn't want to play her game right now. In the end, she opted to just lie still and think to herself.

I've been awake for four days now.

She tried stretching her limbs to see if there was any pain. There was a degree of discomfort, but it wasn't anything overbearing. She asked Miaya if she'd be able to walk again to which she responded by saying it was important to focus on her mental health so the physical part can go along easier. Although, she wasn't sure if she wanted to take it that far.

Ms. Yukizome said she would turn me into the savior. That means…as soon as I heal, she'll do whatever she has planned for me.
No matter what angle she looked at it from, she didn't see any way past Chisa without huge risks. She thought about telling Miaya but decided against it. If what Chisa said was true, the gamer could be putting the therapist in danger by telling her the truth—and that's if she believed her. Either way, she was completely terrified to go against her. Any thought of rebellion would be met with the image of Chisa's despair-ridden face shoving her into that elevator to be executed.

Why is all this happening?

Despite Miaya's warm words, she didn't see any kind of light at the end of the dark tunnel that was her life now. If there was some happy ending to be found in all this, she couldn't find it. Out there, her friends were causing pure mayhem along with a large part of society. In here, she had to deal with her insane former teacher.

That wasn't the most noticeable problem plaguing her, however. There was another strange phenomenon that occurred every night when she was alone.

"Ugh, you're such a worrywart," groaned Junko, sitting at the base of her bed. "Don't you know it's much simpler to go with the flow, like me?"

"I don't want to be like you," answered Chiaki, not even bothering to look in Junko's direction.

This strange development started the first night after she woke up from her coma. She had no idea what her hallucinating Junko of all people meant. It went without saying she never wanted to think about the fake fashionista, but here she was having an imaginary back and forth with her.

Is this some side effect of the medicine?

"A side effect?" said Junko, reading Chiaki's thoughts. "Can you imagine watching one of those commercials where they try and sell you some medicine, and when they name like a hundred possible side effects—it says it may also give you hallucinations of your most hated foe? Hahaha!"

"..."

"Silent treatment? You're the one who called me, so the least you could do is contribute to the conversation."

"You're not real."

"Oh, I'm real. I'm the total embodiment of your fears and insecurities. It just so happened to take the form of the girl who ruined your life and nearly killed you. Talk about a dysfunctional relationship!"

"..."

"More silence? This must be so frustrating. You hate me so much, and I left such an imprint on you that I'm basically you're shadow now. Normal girls our age should be worried about our looks or college entrance exams…but that shit is way too boring for us—am I right?"

"..."

"Look at the bright side. Even though all of your friends have abandoned you…you'll never be alone again." Junko turned around with the same sly smile she always had. "...Because, you'll always have me."

Unable to contain herself, Chiaki hastily grabbed the mirror that was lying on the desk and threw it.
at Junko as hard as she could. Junko's figure vanished before the mirror collided with the opposite wall and shattered. The gamer sat up as if she didn't fully realize what she just did.

A few seconds later, someone came running in. It was one of the male medics. "W-what happened?"

"Sorry... I was clumsy." The man looked visibly suspicious, but he shrugged and went to clean up the broken pieces of mirror. After he was done, he asked her if she was okay before leaving.

Those episodes only last for a minute or two and seemed to always happen around the same time. She was clueless as to whether it was a side effect, or maybe she had lost her mind. She decided to tell Miaya about her problem before she put a hand over her mouth and yawned. After the exhaustion hit her, she pulled the blankets over her head and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

Using Miaya is fun, but it takes a lot of research to get her profession accurate. I had to look up a lot of things about psychology. Also, I had to give her a unique spin since Miaya is supposed to be a little odd, at least that's what I feel. It was worth it, though.
"Hallucinations?" asked Usami after Chiaki finished explaining her strange episodes that occurred. "So, when these hallucinations happen, someone who's not supposed to be here appears and berates you?"

"Yeah."

Miaya had encountered cases like this before where her patients would admit to seeing hallucinations. The way Chiaki explained her hallucination made it obvious this wasn't some identity disorder because she was still fully self-aware. Her condition sounded like someone with symptoms of schizophrenia.

"During these hallucinations, do you see multiple people or one person?"

"It's just one."

"Is it somebody you've met?"

She was a second from answering before stopping herself. Chisa's specific orders on not saying anything about Junko rang in her head. Also, revealing she was seeing Junko could lead Miaya to pry deeper and ask more personal questions. The idea of Chisa finding out was more than enough incentive for her to keep silent about her imaginary assailant.

"…No, I had no idea who they were."

It could be difficult to read Chiaki because she rarely made eye contact, but Miaya could tell there was a slight hesitation when she answered. "…I see. Did the individual you see physically assault you, or was it all just verbal?"

"They just kept talking."

"Hmm…" It would be best for Miaya to tell Chiaki this was all no big deal in order to reassure her. However, she wanted to be as honest and forthcoming as possible. She could tell Chiaki was being more evasive and mysterious than she should be, so the therapist decided the less duplicity in their relationship, the better.

"Have I…finally gone crazy?"

"No, no!" yelled Usami, frantically waving her paws. "Please don't use such a cheap word like that. Just like anybody can get the common cold, anyone can become mentally vulnerable. Actually, if you went through everything you did and came back perfectly sound—I really would've thought something was wrong with you."

"Then, what's—"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with your actual brain if that's what you're thinking. If I had to give a diagnosis right now, I'd say paranoid schizophrenia would be the closest. People tend to dwell on matters more at night than during the day, and your medication starts to wear off at that time. Also, this isn't exactly an ideal environment right now with the Tragedy still active. Until more details come to light, I'm afraid I can't do much but rule these hallucinations being a culmination of all the stress your mind is under."
Chiaki sighed, disappointed there wasn't an easier solution to this. Having this be a side effect of some medication she was taking would've made this a lot simpler. It was annoying finding out these visions of the person she hated the most was just another thing that was wrong with her.

"If you want, I can tell Kimura to—"

"No, it's fine."

"Alright; however, if these hallucinations worsen to where you actually are being attacked, please let me know."

She lightly nodded before plopping her head back on the pillow.

One common misconception people have, because of her shut-in gamer reputation, is she hates sunlight. In reality, Chiaki loved nice and sunny days; she would open all the curtains in her room, letting the sunlight flood the area until dusk. It's why Chiaki truly dislikes the way it looked outside. Instead of a blue sky—all that could be seen were dark, foreboding clouds during the day. It was disgusting to see a planet that offered so much natural beauty relegated to a barren, depressing landscape.

"How could something like this happen, Miaya? How could the world just... end?"

"I wouldn't say the world has ended as much as I'd say we're experiencing a mass epidemic. Despite how bad it sounds, the people in despair are still the minority in terms of the total population."

"All this happening while I was unconscious is unbelievable."

"I actually have a theory on it. I think humanity is just having a bad temper tantrum."

"Temper tantrum?"

"All of history's oppression, violence, and dissension is being let out. The world is just venting the anger it contained for thousands of years. If I had to look for a silver lining, it's that when somebody releases their pent-up anger—as long as it's within reason—they can come away better and calmer. Don't let that sound like I somewhat approve of what's happening. Just like you, I think it's terrible what's transpiring. Unfortunately, this improbable situation is our reality now."

"...Reality sucks."

"Hehe, I guess I can't really argue with that right now."

"If this is all just a temper tantrum, then does it mean this was always going to happen?"

"I don't want to believe that. Because... no matter what—we must never forgive killing." When Miaya said that, Chiaki saw a look of forcefulness she'd never seen from the composed therapist. "I do believe there are instances when one must fight back, but this is just cruelty; violence for the sake of it. I would compare humanities anger to a grenade rather than a time bomb. I just wonder... who could've pulled the linchpin?"

Chiaki turned her body to the side so that her back was facing Miaya. She felt too guilty and ashamed because she knew full well who pulled that linchpin. To make matters worse, in her head, she felt her lack of prudent action back then contributed to the overall state of things.

"What would happen to those responsible?" asked Chiaki.
"The instigator triggered international pandemonium. I can't think the ones responsible would get anything except the most severe penalty."

She shuddered a bit, realizing the most severe penalty would either be lifelong incarceration or death. Even if she didn't want to, she did have some connection to Junko. Thanks to Chisa, she's pretty much become an accomplice at this point. If someone in the Future Foundation figured out she was lying, there's no doubt she'd face huge repercussions. All of it complemented Chisa's absolute command.

"Hmm?" hummed Chiaki, seeing something on her pillow that caught her attention. It was a strand of hair that, undeniably, belonged to her because she's the only one that uses the bed. What was weird is the piece of hair was clearly white. Is this really my hair?

"What do you have there?" asked Usami, tilting her head.

"I think this is my hair." Chiaki handed Miaya the pale strand. She observed it for a moment before Usami spoke again.

"Marie Antoinette Syndrome."

"That queen?"

"Aren't you a smart cookie! According to reports, a phenomenon happened that consisted of her hair turning white before her execution. It's also a popular tool for old religious storytellers to explain the grief of their characters. There were even some accounts of war veterans developing this too."

"Is my hair going to turn white?"

"I really doubt it. Most experts don't even believe stress has any major correlation with your hair color. Although, this is definitely a white piece of hair I'm looking at right now. Hehe, you better watch out Chiaki, or you'll wake up with hair as white as snow one day!"

Usami was laughing it off, but Chiaki still felt unsure. It was kind of creepy thinking she could have the same color hair as an ice queen character from a visual novel game.

"Why don't you cut your hair?" asked Usami. "You can't do it yourself?"

"My mom would always do it."

Miaya didn't know if she should pursue the subject of Chiaki's family or not. The topic had only come up once to which she only responded by saying she never saw them often, and she had no idea where they would be. According to her files, she lived with her mom through her youth, and they were middle-class. It was unknown how close their relationship was because Chiaki never talked about it, although it was certain she wasn't physically abused or anything of that nature. Miaya concluded it was something she didn't want to talk about.

"If it's bothering you, I could get somebody to cut it."

"It's alright," she replied, waving her hand. "Actually, there's something else I want to ask. Just what's happened to the school? Is it still there, or has it been destroyed?" There wasn't any kind of burning desire for her to know. It was just something she had on her mind.
"The Reserve Course building was destroyed, but the building where you attended class at is still standing."

"It's been abandoned?"

"Not exactly. The former headmaster, Jin Kirigiri, along with the seventy-eighth class are taking refuge there."

Her eyes widened because Miaya's statement felt like it sent a surge of electricity throughout her body. *If the seventy-eighth class is together at Hope's Peak Academy, then doesn't that mean she is...* She realized how much danger they could be in if Junko was with them. The prospect of a bunch of people being in isolation with her made a terrifying and all too familiar scenario play out in her head.

"Miaya—" exclaimed Chiaki before biting her tongue hard enough to make her cringe.

"What's wrong?" asked Usami, looking confused.

The idea of Junko having a bunch of students at her mercy was almost enough for Chiaki to expose everything she knew. However, something made her freeze before she could say anything—it was fear. The fear of trying to cross Chisa and go against Junko; that same fear that strangled her on the day of her execution.

"Just take deep breaths," commanded Usami, noticing her patient's discomfort.

Chiaki did what she was told for a minute until she stopped shaking. Now that the fear had subsided, she realized revealing what she knew would be too risky. She didn't know for a fact that Junko was part of the seventy-eighth or if she would be with them if she was. For all she knew, the entire seventy-eighth class could be Ultimate Despair. Even if she could say something, she didn't know if the risks would be worth the benefits.

"I'm sorry, Miaya."

"You don't have to apologize. Is it okay if I ask what made you so upset?"

"It's just..." As much as she didn't like lying to Miaya, she had to think up a story. "Why would they choose to stay there? Isn't that dangerous?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the specific reason they stayed. Maybe, for them, that school was the last hopeful place on a planet drowned in despair. Perhaps, they had all gotten close enough to where they preferred to stick together during this whole ordeal."

An interesting thought crossed Chiaki's mind. If Junko had chosen the seventy-eighth class back then, would she and the rest of her class have chosen to stay? She honestly didn't know the answer. There could've been a chance that she was barricaded in Hope's Peak Academy, and someone from the seventy-eighth class would be laying here instead of her. She felt bad when that scenario sounded more favorable.

The next couple of hours passed by quickly enough. After their little back and forth, they talked about some random things here and there. Currently, this would be the fifth day she's been awake. Still, the things happening around her didn't feel real. She was half-expecting to wake up in her room and realize it was all a dream.

"How about the gaming videos online?" asked Usami, trying to figure out how active Chiaki was online. Since she was the former Ultimate Gamer, she must have played tons of computer games.
"There are people who play the same games you do, right?"

"Most of them are okay, but some of them don't respect the game. One time, there was this beautiful woman who was playing one of my favorite games, and it was obvious she was just doing it for popularity without trying to understand the game at all. I don't like it when people try to use a game for their own benefit—even crappy games deserve to be understood."

Usami giggled because Chiaki went off on one of her gaming lectures. "Did you ever talk to someone who did respect the game?"

"I only get online to see the news of any upcoming games. I always preferred to play the game rather than watch it."

"As expected of the former Ultimate Gamer! I'm gonna guess and say you had a part-time job? You must've had tons of games, so—"

"Companies would send me games all the time to give my opinions."

"That's impressive. They must've really held your talent in high regard."

"I guess."

"How about you make your own game? You've played so many and people want to hear your opinions, so I think it would be spectacular if you were to make a game. I know I'd definitely play it!"

The thought of making her own game was something she considered for a long time. The chance to create a great game everybody loved while forever being cemented in gaming history was something she definitely wanted. There was just one problem.

"I wouldn't know what to make it about." After playing so many games and exploring so many concepts, she didn't really know if she could add anything meaningful to the industry.

"We'll start with the main character. How would you make them?"

"There was one character I liked. They were really nice, but they didn't have many friends and was pretty much a failure. After traveling for a while with their few friends, they all became stronger and famous because of it. Unfortunately, most of the characters died because the main one had gotten too cocky with power and corruption. In the end, while the main character resolved things, they left on a lonely adventure."

"That's fascinating."

She knew Miaya was expecting her to say something like a zesty, strong-willed female lead or a smart and charming tactician. However, that tragic tale she just described was something that always stuck with her. Before another word could be spoken, a knock was heard from the door. Miaya excused herself and exited the room to see whom the visitor was.

After about a minute, she entered again. "Someone's come to visit you, Chiaki. I'll step out so you can talk in private."

A shudder ran down her spine because the first person she thought of was Chisa. What could she want this time? Has she realized her plan was not going to work, and she's come to dispose of me? Did I break the agreement in some way? She answered Miaya despite having to wrestle the words out of her mouth. "…Okay."
While the person entering was a familiar face, it certainly wasn't Chisa. It turned out to be her former classmate, Ryouta Mitarai.

"Nanami!" he exclaimed, approaching her bed and falling to his knees. "You really are alive… Thank goodness…" He looked visibly choked up while he kept speaking. "After what happened, I didn't know if…"

The last memory she had of him was when Nagito and her found him being forced to work on something for Junko. After he rapidly fled, that was the final time she'd seen him up until now.

"I heard what happened to you. A bunch of Reserve Course students attacked you, right?"

*He thinks that's what happened? Does he know about Ms. Yukizome and our class?*

"Mitarai, has Ms. Yukizome said anything to you?"

"After she found me, I met the rest of the Future Foundation. I've been working here ever since. I'm head of the Tenth Division."

"Do you know what happened to our class?"

"Ms. Yukizome told me they all vanished. I can't imagine everything they must be going through. I've tried my hardest to search for them, but I haven't found anything."

*Ms. Yukizome didn't tell him... He doesn't know the truth of our class being Ultimate Despair.*

"You must hate me. I made the brainwashing video that helped tear the world apart. Are you… going to tell them the truth?"

She was in no position to say anything. Chisa never mentioned Ryouta, but the same rules probably applied to him. If Chisa willingly let him join the Future Foundation, that means she must have some kind of use for him. As for hating him for his part in all this, she couldn't find it in herself to care. She still believed her failure was as big of a contributor to the state of things.

"No…"

Ryouta let out a breath of relief as soon as she answered. "Thank you, Nanami. I promise I'm going to make things right. I can't tell you the details yet—but trust me when I say I'm going to fix this!" He had a confident look that contradicted his normal expression. The shadows under his eyes were similar to the ones Chiaki had now, but Ryouta's was probably due to him never getting enough sleep. "How are you doing so far?"

"Not good."

Ryouta was caught off guard by her blatant honesty. "Oh…well, you'll certainly get better. I never attended class, but he always talked about how good you were as a class representative."

*He's talking about the other Mitarai, thought Chiaki, remembering the huskier version of Ryouta, who turned out to be the Ultimate Impostor.*

"I'm glad you were able to make it, Nanami. You being alive strengthens my belief we'll meet our classmates again."

She narrowed her eyes while thinking of the cruelties their classmates might be committing at this moment.
"If you ever need anything, I'll try my best to help you. Also, if you just hold onto hope—I'm sure you'll feel better." Ryouta left the hospital room after he finished speaking.

Chiaki, meanwhile, looked downwards while murmuring, "Hope… What hope…?"

VVV

The day passed by like it always did. Miaya and Chiaki talked for a while longer until the therapist had to leave. It was night, and she was playing with her Game Girl. She felt restless, so she tried to keep her mind preoccupied with playing a puzzle game. Of course, that didn't keep an invader from talking to her.

"Were you serious about earlier?" asked Junko.

"...I don't know what you're talking about," she replied, not looking up from her game.

"Liar, liar. You know exactly what I meant. It was when that animator dipshit went on about hope or whatever."

"What does it matter?"

"If you really hate hope now, then why don't you come to my side of the spectrum? Say what you want, but I guarantee your former classmates are having a lot more fun than you are. So what's the problem of saying screw it and embracing those wonderful despair impulses?"

"..."

"That's what's so interesting about you; you're not black or white. Chiaki Nanami, you truly are—"

"Be quiet…"

"—the definition of a nobody."

"Shut up!" she exclaimed, prying her eyes from her game to see that Junko had disappeared. She grabbed her head, feeling a headache coming on.

"Junko…" she murmured as if the word was poison.

VVV

"You received my message, right, Chairman Tengan?" politely asked Chisa, talking to Kazuo Tengan in his office at the main headquarters of the Future Foundation.

"I did," he answered, sipping some coffee. "It will take some time before all the division leaders are able to get together."

"Excellent."

"May I ask the reason for this sudden need for a meeting?"

"There is a…matter I want to bring to everyone's attention." She turned her back to Kazuo because she could barely keep the laughter in anymore. "...I think you'll find it intriguing."
"Yes!" exclaimed Ibuki because she, Chiaki, and Mahiru rushed into an empty cabin. Currently, the seventy-seventh class was on a ski trip, and the trio had gotten separated from the main group. It was heavily snowing outside, and they had no idea where they were. With the sun going down, they rushed to find somewhere to take refuge.

"Thank goodness…" muttered Chiaki, breathing onto her hands to warm them.

"I told you we should've turned left, Mioda," began Mahiru while shivering. "Now we're in the middle of nowhere with no way to contact the others."

"Even the greatest performances have improvisation!" passionately replied Ibuki.

"Your improvisation almost got us frozen to death."

"In games, ice levels are often the most challenging," added Chiaki. "We were lucky to have survived…"

"Haha!" laughed Ibuki. "Count on the Ultimate Gamer to make us getting lost in this icy wonderland sound like an epic journey!"

"Hmm, it looks like this place is empty," guessed Mahiru. "I think it's best if we hang out here for the night."

"Ooh!" shouted Ibuki. "In this situation, you'd have two lovers that would get lost and keep each other warm through the night with a passionate embrace. We're all girls, but Ibuki's open to it!"

"Don't be stupid!" exclaimed Mahiru while her face brightened. "This isn't some cheesy romance novel."

"Don't be all negative, Koizumi. What does the class rep have to say about this?"

"Huh?" She had already pulled out one of her games, so she didn't hear anything that was just said. "Oh, um sure."

"Nanami has spoken!" cheered Ibuki, throwing her hands in the air.

"That doesn't count!" countered Mahiru. "She obviously wasn't paying attention. Do you have to carry that everywhere, Nanami?"

"There was a special event that only could be done at this time," she replied, not tearing her eyes from the screen. "Should I have left it?"

"No, I can relate since I'm always afraid I'll miss out on a great photo opportunity if I leave my camera behind."

"It's kind of like how Ibuki wants to suddenly start playing her guitar when she gets a great idea for a song."

"I think it'd be problematic if you started doing your screamo on a public train or something…"
advised Mahiru. "Anyway, we should look around this place."

The three Ultimates searched around for anything noticeable. Ibuki energetically searched every corner as if she was looking for a murder weapon. Chiaki would keep peeking away from the screen to check an object before returning to the game. There didn't seem to be anything of note until Chiaki and Mahiru heard Ibuki.

"Ibuki found something!" She had removed some empty boxes to reveal an entrance on the floor.

"Where do you think this could go?" asked Mahiru.

"This is totally a question for the Ultimate Gamer!" announced Ibuki.

"Well, secret passages like this lead to some kind of treasure or special item. Although, sometimes it could lead to a dangerous boss that could tear us limb from limb if we're not prepared."

"...How can you say that so openly?" asked Mahiru.

"You only live once!" confidently said Ibuki, getting behind Chiaki and nudging her. "Ibuki thinks the expert should lead the way."

"Alright," agreed Chiaki, getting oddly serious. "I'll be the vanguard, Mioda will be the assaulter, and Mahiru will stay behind as support."

"Got it, Chief!"

_There isn't a serious bone between these two_, thought Mahiru, wondering how two people could have such a contrast in personality, yet be equally as silly.

After opening the door, a narrow stairway leading into a dense darkness was revealed. Chiaki led the way while being careful not to slip on anything. Despite the cabin being unused, Chiaki noticed how it wasn't very dusty in the dark passage. The stairs weren't making the ominous creaking noise like they did in horror movies.

"We've reached another door," said Chiaki, reaching the bottom. This time, the door wasn't on the floor, so she was sure there was some kind of basement or hidden lair.

"Forget the romance story," chimed in Ibuki. "This is a horror flick! I should've brought the Ouija board..."

"Are you crazy!" exclaimed Mahiru in a whispered screech. "You shouldn't mess with those things!"

"Koizumi is afraid of ghosts?" teased Ibuki. "That's such a cute secret."

"Everyone knows there's no such thing as ghosts! It's just...we shouldn't tempt things is all..."

"Ibuki's amazing hearing can hear how frightened Koizumi is right now."

"Can we just open the door...?"

"Let's get in position," began Chiaki, leaning next to the door. "Get my back, Mioda. You get on the other side, Koizumi."

"Roger," agreed Ibuki, positioning herself behind Chiaki as if they were about to break into a room full of armed terrorists. "Awaiting orders."
"You guys are officially worse than Tanaka," commented Mahiru, deciding to just play along.

"On three," began Chiaki. "One… Two… Three!" She quickly turned the knob and walked into what was more darkness. A bright light went on, and what Chiaki saw next left her speechless.

"Surprise!" yelled most of the seventy-seventh class. Nekomaru and Akane were audibly louder, and ones like Fuyuhiko and Peko had a more hushed tone. The odd one out was Mikan, who missed her cue and said surprise a second after everyone else.

"This is…" murmured Chiaki, who couldn't think of what to say right now. The wide, bright room she was looking at was the complete opposite of the dark one above them. Tons of party decorations and snacks adorned the entire area. Everyone from her class, except Nagito and Chisa, was present. "What is all this…?"

"Come on, class rep!" began Ibuki. "We all planned this surprise birthday party, and that's all you can say?"

"Birthday party?" She thought about the date and realized her birthday wasn't for a few months.

"We wanted to do it before heading back to school," answered Mahiru. "Me and Ibuki were supposed to lead you here while everyone would wait until it was time for the surprise. This cabin is actually close to the lodge. We know your birthday isn't actually today, but we wanted to dedicate it to you—so just pretend."

"You better be grateful," added Fuyuhiko, cracking his neck. "Moving all this crap back and forth was a pain in the ass."

"Nice try, Baby Gangsta," interrupted Akane. "You're the one who kept saying how any man that was too lazy to heap all that stuff up here was a pussy."

"What the hell did I tell you about calling me that!"

"It was I who set up this unique array of decorations," said Sonia. Chiaki couldn't believe she didn't take immediate notice of the classic pixelated sprites of popular game characters placed everywhere.

"Personally, I would've preferred something more Victorian—but this is nice too."

"On Miss Sonia's orders, I gathered up most of this stuff," added Kazuichi, sounding proud about helping out his beloved Ultimate Princess. "There weren't any stores near Hope's Peak that sells otaku stuff, so I had to take a few trains to Akihabara with Tanaka. Even though Miss Sonia asked for my help, he just had to tag along."

"Silence wretch," scoffed Gundham. "Consider yourself fortunate I was able to hold off those hellspawn long enough for us to complete our task."

"Those hardcore otaku fans can get pretty crazy…" added Mahiru.

"I'm sure Sonia asked Tanaka, and you just tagged along," teased Hiyoko. "You know—since you're trying not to drown in the friend zone."

"That's not true, damn it!" countered Kazuichi. "Tell this little witch she's wrong, Miss Sonia!"

"Your winter clothing looks really nice, Tanaka," complemented Sonia, ignoring Kazuichi. "It truly
"Well...thank you..." he replied, looking embarrassed. Hiyoko proceeded to laugh at Kazuichi's expense while he sulked in the corner.

"Naturally, I set up this collection of cuisines," added Teruteru in his artificially smooth voice. "Does this stunning display warm your heart enough for you to fall for me?"

"Not really," answered Chiaki, only partly listening since she was still taking everything in.

"But you haven't even tasted the food yet. You could show your appreciation by strip—" Before Teruteru could finish his profanity-laced sentence, Nekomaru lifted him off the ground with a headlock. He started squirming and yammering in his country dialect, but his efforts were futile against Nekomaru's superior strength.

"If you want to thank someone, thank Mitarai," added Nekomaru. "He gathered up all of us a few weeks ago and told us his plan."

The fake Ryouta's expression looked like a mix of frustration and embarrassment as if he didn't want that fact to be spoken out loud. "Well, it would be more accurate to say I proposed the idea and everyone else ran with it. Since celebrating so many parties would be annoying, the idea was for us to combine that into one big party celebrating the class itself."

"Why say it's a surprise birthday for me?"

"U-um..." murmured Mikan, finally getting over her miscue, "you're the biggest reason we're all able to coexist like this, so we...you know—we thought it'd be best if we dedicated it to your birthday."

"Ms. Yukizome is the biggest reason; I haven't done that much."

"Ha!" laughed Ibuki, playfully wrapping her arms around Chiaki's neck, making their faces touch. "You're modesty never fails! Ibuki thinks the class rep should take more credit!"

"I agree," cut in Peko. "Even Kuzuryu seemed to be happy to do this, even if he won't say."
Fuyuhiko couldn't respond since he was still arguing with Akane, who was multitasking because she was digging into the food.

"You all..." quietly said Chiaki, not feeling this overwhelmed since meeting Gala Omega's creator. Before attending Hope's Peak, she had never been apart of anything like this. It was these moments that made her glad she chose to attend the school.

"I have one request," she began. "When Ms. Yukizome comes back, we should throw a party for her too." Everyone not preoccupied with something agreed. She considered Nagito, but nobody knew where he was.

"Alright!" yelled Ibuki. "Let's kick this off with a live performance, courtesy of Ibuki!"

"Oh god!" yelled Kazuichi.

VVV

"What a nice story," commented Usami, enjoying Chiaki's retelling of her memories. Today, the therapist had finally gotten her to talk about school life without her reacting badly. Chiaki never once said any names, which Miaya thought was weird, but she was just happy her patient was
gradually opening up more and more.

"Everything was great until mostly everyone drank beverages someone spiked with alcohol," added Chiaki, with the same stoic face she always had. That somebody the gamer was referring to was a certain petite dancer. "Things got a bit...weird."

"Oh, my..."

"We weren't allowed at that cabin anymore."

"Hehe...youth is a wonderful thing," said Usami while Miaya was a little hesitant to ask what she meant.

Chiaki was surprised when she told Miaya one of her more fonder memories. It was unsettling to think of the contrast of how she felt then, and how she feels now. Back then, she never wanted to leave Hope's Peak if it meant she could stay with everyone. Now, thinking about those times made her head hurt and filled her stomach with knots. It would probably always be that way even if she were to recover fully.

"Why did you choose a ski resort?" asked Usami.

"We thought about going to the beach, but everyone wanted to play in the cold one last time before it got warmer. For a while, we considered going to a tropical island."

"I like those types of spots. The peaceful atmosphere and clean air make places like that a therapeutic haven. If I got the clearance, I wouldn't mind taking you to one."

"Is there one you want to visit?"

"I've been to a few, but there was always one that caught my eye. It's actually part of a project I've been in charge of working on. This island is called Jabbo—" Miaya instantly stopped inputting commands. "Sorry, I got a little too talkative for a second and mentioned something I shouldn't have. Are you trying to sneak information out of me, Chiaki?"

"I'm not a detective."

"I'm kidding, silly! It wouldn't matter since that project won't have anything to do with you."

Whatever Miaya was alluding to was something she preferred not to know. If it was top secret, she'd rather it stay that way. Whether it was Chisa, Junko, or her class—she was tired of keeping secrets.

_She still has such a deathly aura around her, but she's getting more comfortable_, thought Miaya, internally evaluating her patient. _Opening up about her school life is a big step forward. Maybe now I should see how far I can push the envelope..._

"Chiaki!" playfully exclaimed Miaya. "Mind if I ask you something personal? It'll be between us girls."

"Aren't you a bunny?"

"Heeey!" Usami put paws on her hips while smoke comically blew out of her ears. "I'm a rabbit, and there's a living woman controlling me."

Chiaki saw Miaya blink in conjecture. She was starting to believe Miaya blinking in that manner
was just her way of being funny. "What did you want to ask?" She couldn't answer every question, but she wanted to cooperate with Miaya if she could.

"Have you ever...had a boyfriend?" Miaya considered asking that question in a more subtle way, but she decided it was best to just come out and ask. The fear of Chiaki having some kind of bad recollection worried her.

However, her expression didn't change at all. Her gaze turned towards the window before she answered, "No."

"Really? Such a nice girl like you must've had a few admirers."

"I had a reputation of being a shut-in who only cared about playing games where I lived. Also, I was mostly alone since I didn't want to be bothered with people."

"With the way you and Yukizome describe it, your classmates have a lot of respect for you. Maybe out of the boys there, one had feelings for you."

As odd as it might've been for a girl her age, she never considered that possibility when she was at Hope's Peak. She was so absorbed with thinking about how they could get along, she never stopped to think if anyone in her class had those kinds of feelings. As far as she knew, none of the others wanted to have that kind of relationship with her. The only one that did show some affection was Teruteru, but he was disqualified since he gave that same kind of attention to everyone.

"I don't think so."

"You're a silent observer who only gets involved when she needs to; that's pretty honorable if you ask me. If it makes you feel any better, I've never had that kind of relationship with anyone."

The gamer seemed to show some interest since she looked away from the window and back at Miaya before she asked, "How? All I do is play games, but you actually help people and solve their problems."

"First, stop putting yourself down like that. Second, being a therapist might be the reason I haven't been able to have that kind of relationship with anyone."

"...I don't get it."

"Well, not too many guys go for a woman that does most of her talking through a rabbit interface!" answered Usami, giggling. "Have you ever seen a romance movie where the patient falls in love with their therapist? It's kind of like that."

"Why does it matter if you're a therapist? Maybe they like you because you're so amazing."

"Thank you!" She wasn't sure at first, but Miaya looked embarrassed for a moment. It always intrigued her how the Ultimate Therapist can get flustered so easily. "When someone is dealing with emotional distress, they become very vulnerable. So you have people that fall in love with the therapist, not the person. All anybody wants is someone who will listen and understand, and that just happens to be part of the job. They're attracted by the idea of me being the perfect woman, which I'm certainly not."

"Oh...I'm sorry."

"Please don't be! Honestly, it's only ever happened three or four times at the most."
"Doesn't it make you sad?" She remembered how people never cared enough to get to know her as a person. There might've been an argument she was actively avoiding people, but it didn't change the unpleasantness. "Nobody tried to understand you beyond what your talent was."

"As long as I can help people, that's good enough for me. It's like how you were with your class."

"But I've never had someone feel that way about me."

"Let's rephrase the question, then. Is there anybody you were interested in?"

"Me? Well..." There was one face that popped up in her mind. That short moment of warmth was replaced by a deep sorrow.

Miaya, noticing her sadness, realized she might've asked something taboo. "If you don't want to say —"

"No," mumbled Chiaki, regaining her composure. It felt like a sharp stab to the heart at first, but she took a deep breath and calmed herself. It was painful to think of how the story between her and that boy ended, but she decided to give Miaya a brief summary. She calmed herself down. _It might be the medication, but her grasp on her emotions have improved considerably..._

"There was one boy I got along with; we would play video games after school. It didn't last that long, but I had a lot of fun. Although...whatever I felt was probably one-sided—he left shortly after."

"Why did he leave?"

"He wasn't happy with himself because he was part the Reserve Course."

"Is that so?" Miaya looked surprised, making Chiaki wonder if she said more than she should've. "Personally, I never liked the Reserve Course idea. Human beings are naturally very envious, so I always felt a third-world system like that was doomed to fail. Though, I never imagined it'd be as bad as what really happened."

"Yeah..."

"I must say, it speaks volumes how you got along with a Reserve Course student that closely. This is the first time I've heard an Ultimate admit to that."

"I never cared whether he had a talent or not. Actually, I thought he was the luckier one since he didn't have to worry about it."

"From what I can conclude from the little you told me, he had some confidence issues. It's not uncommon. You said you never saw him again?"

"...No." Technically speaking, she did and she didn't at the same time. Saying Hajime had confidence issues was an understatement, just as Chisa alluded to when she told her about the Izuru Kamakura Project. If someone would willingly do what he did to himself, he must've had a serious inferiority complex she guessed.

"It's always hard when someone's feelings don't work out. What I'm about to say is painfully cliché, but there's plenty of fish in the sea. When this all ends, wouldn't you want to settle down somewhere?"
"What if this never ends?" countered Chiaki, expressing glass-half-empty sentiments.

"For the sake of this question, let's say it does. Don't you dream of having a fancy wedding?"

"I'd rather have a small gathering anywhere that was convenient. If it was alright, I'd wear my normal clothes instead of a super expensive dress I'd only wear once."

"You're someone who values substance over flashiness. There is a correlation between how much people spend on their wedding day versus how long their marriage lasts."

"All that money used for one day could be spent for something more useful."

"Like video games?"

"Telepathy?"

"Ahaha! You can call it a lucky guess."

Miaya took this opportunity to check the time. Since Chisa requested a meeting a week ago, all of the division leaders were suppose to gather this afternoon. Their session today would have to end early if Miaya was going to make it. "That's it for today, Chiaki. You did wonderfully!"

"Isn't it early?"

"There's a meeting the division leaders have to attend. The chairman said Yukizome has something she wants to discuss with everyone."

For a moment, Chiaki was afraid that meant Chisa was going to tell everyone the truth about her, but she realized that didn't make sense because of the whole savior thing. All of it was Chisa's plan, after all. Whatever that despair-driven housekeeper had in mind was beyond her.

"Assuming there's no hold-up, I'll see you tomorrow!" said Usami before Miaya left the room.

Is this related to me? thought Chiaki. What are you going to do, Ms. Yukizome...?

VVV

Far away on an undisclosed island, sat the primary base of the Future Foundation. Patrols and agents littered the area on constant rotation in case something were to go awry. Inside, a select number of individuals were gathered in the main conference room. The tension and dissonance could be felt in the air while the group of diverse, talented Hope's Peak alumni quietly sat at the table. Among these individuals was a woman in a white coat pouring everyone tea while licking her lips in anticipation.

"Now that we are all present," announced Kazuo, scanning the faces of his appointed division leaders, "let us begin."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

1. That flashback let me play with the SDR2 cast for the first time, which is awesome
since they're awesome!
"This occasion marks the fourth time the Future Foundation leaders have come together since its founding," announced Kazuo. "Seeing as how we're all here, I suggest doing a quick status report before attending to the main topic. Munakata?"

"Officially, as of yesterday, I've made it so the Future Foundation has the backing of over eighty countries worldwide. The only ones left are the larger countries where they still believe they can control the epidemic by themselves."

"I'll project the estimated number of casualties so far," said Usami while Miaya simultaneously controlled her interface as well as her personal laptop. "These are rough estimations categorized by what area they're from." After Miaya put the numbers up, an uncomfortable muteness permeated the air. It went without saying the numbers were staggering.

"Damn Despairs…" growled Juzo, balling his fists. "Is this legit, Gekkogahara?"

"I'm afraid so," answered Usami. "Going by the number of casualties versus the total population of the area, the most proficient places like Japan or the United States have the more favorable numbers… Still, with the way things are going…"

"Eventually, the majority of the world will be overtaken by despair, right?" answered Koichi with an out-of-place smile.

"How horrible…" added Seiko, looking down.

"If there was a bright side to this," began Gozu, "it's that the Future Foundation's influence will begin to spread to those looking for help. However, when we all unite, then what's next?"

"Not only that," said Daisaku in his deceptively high-pitched voice. "Supplying all of the Future Foundation will only get harder as time goes on."

"The solution is easy," interrupted Ruruka, shoving one of her sweets in Sonosuke's mouth. "Let's just keep taking out any despair assholes we find before it spreads further. Like you said before, Munakata—we should just wipe them out."

"I can get behind that!" added Juzo. "Just give me the word Tengan and I'll lead the entire force myself in a heartbeat."

"Now hold on," cut in Chisa, putting on her friendly smile. "I agree it needs to be dealt with, but is conducting history's biggest purge the best way to do it?"

"What did you have in mind, Ms. Yukizome?" quietly asked Ryouta.

"Well, what's the best way to take care of a snake?"

"You're suggesting we go after the head," assumed Kazuo. "In other words—the people or person who started this."

"All we know is it most likely originated at Hope's Peak Academy," stated Kyosuke. "As we shared with you all before, I couldn't find the culprit."

"That's right," added Chisa, glancing at Juzo to catch an uncomfortable expression before he
regained his composure a second later. "Right, Juzo?"

"Yeah…that's right. Shit got crazy so fast, I never had a chance to find out."

"I have to say," began Koichi, "it's odd how you three were thoroughly investigating the school for over a year, and you never found a thing. You must've had at least one lead."

"Do you doubt us, Kizakura?" asked Munakata in a slightly annoyed tone. He tasked the job of investigating the school to his two closest friends. If they both said nothing came up, he believed them. "The fault is mine. The whole thing was my plan." He narrowed his eyes sharply. "I will find out who's behind this, and when I do—I'll deal with them with my own hands."

Koichi put his hands up in a playful manner as if he told a bad joke that didn't go over well. "I wasn't trying to antagonize you. I was just tossing theories around."

"Still, it's true that pinpointing those responsible would be helpful," said Gozu. "Do we really have no name?"

"I did as much research as I could," said Usami. Miaya started surfing through records on her laptop. "The only thing I discovered was the event we've labeled the Tragedy of Hope's Peak Academy, which consisted of the murders of the student council, and what's happening now is most likely related. The only name that ever appeared was…Izuru Kamakura."

"I thought we agreed that was a lie to get the Reserve Course students angry," added Seiko. "Could such a person have been in Hope's Peak Academy?"

"I can confirm it was indeed a project the Steering Committee was undertaking," informed Kazuo. "Whether or not they completed the project is unknown."

Chisa struggled not to smirk wider than she already was. Sorry; for the time being, that will remain a mystery. Even if they somehow found the secret laboratory, I took the liberty of destroying everything after I rescued Chiaki.

"Regardless of who's responsible," began Kazuo, "it doesn't change that our main focus is containing the spread of despair."

"This is dumb," scoffed Ruruka. "They made their choice. Why should we waste time helping a bunch of mindless psychopaths? Also, let's not forget a key point. Ruruka glanced at Seiko before continuing. "There's still a chance someone here could be a traitor."

"What are you…" began a frustrated Seiko before Ruruka cut her off.

"Don't say it's not possible," added Ruruka. "We only just started working together, so someone here could've already been in despair."

"You can't say things like that!" screeched Daisaku. "We all have to work together and not doubt each other!"

"Shut up!" countered Ruruka. "Quit lecturing me in that weird voice—it's creepy."

Daisaku started sulking before Koichi cut in as he said, "She might not have put it the best way, but it's true one of us could be a double agent. Even though the Despairs seem to be openly insane, there could be some that can turn it off and on as they please."

"That could be true," stated Chisa. "However, we can't let a paranoid suspicion distract us from
what we should do. If we start fighting with each other, then despair is already winning. Have some faith in your fellow Hope's Peak alumni, I say."

"Yukizome's right," agreed Gozu, huffing loudly. "If any of you try anything against the other… you'll answer to me!" Everything seemed to mellow out after the loud outburst from the horned protector.

"Whatever," commented Ruruka, going back to feeding her beloved Sonosuke.

"With that out of the way," began Chisa, looking at Kazuo, "I'd like to proceed now."

"As you wish, Yukizome."

She slowly stood up and looked at her fellow Future Foundation employees. She had already gone over how she wanted to do this. It was going to be difficult to accomplish with the melting pot of personalities in the room, but Chisa was sure she could pull this off.

"Calling this the apocalypse wouldn't be too far-fetched. Why, if things continue the way they are, we could be looking at an epidemic that will set our society back hundreds of years."

"Like the Dark Ages, you mean," said Kyosuke.

"It took humanity a long time to recover from the loss of knowledge. Soon, things like war, crime, and anarchy will become the norm."

"What are you getting at, Yukizome?" asked Juzo. "We already know how crappy all of this is."

"The Future Foundation's influence continues to spread as we speak. We'll be the world's leading force against despair. Although, even if our numbers and weapons keep growing, we'll still be missing something crucial—a trump card."

"Trump card?" questioned Seiko, raising an eyebrow.

"Whoever is behind this is someone who embodies everything that is despair. It could be a supreme being like Izuru Kamakura or a group of people, but it doesn't change what we're missing is that trump card we need."

"Would you be referring to…Ultimate Hope?" asked Kazuo, earning a giggle from Chisa.

"That's an amazing accolade which would greatly help the Future Foundation. Still, what I mean is different from that. What I mean, is someone we can bet the future on…" Chisa hopped up on the table and spread out her arms while she shouted, "The savior!"

It was Chisa's intention to give that kind of demonstration for her master plan. She figured this would be the most effective way to make her claim. However, her exuberance was overshadowed by the awkward silence in the room. She waited for someone to respond so she could further explain herself.

Did I say it clear enough? thought Chisa, deciding to say it again. "The savior!"

"We…heard you," added Kyosuke, rubbing his forehead.

"Umm," mumbled Ruruka, deciding on the perfect way to respond to a situation like this, "what…?"

"The trump card of the Future Foundation will be a person known as the savior," said Yukizome.
"When we face who's responsible, they'll be our ace in the hole!"

"Sorry, but I'm kind of lost," admitted Juzo, scratching his chin like there was a hard puzzle in front of him. "You found someone you're calling our savior, and they'll be the reason we win against despair?"

"Correct. I've assessed this person myself, so I'm certain they're what we need."

"Okay…" muttered Kyosuke, deciding to humor Chisa. "Does our savior have a name?"

"Of course." Chisa licked her lips before giving the grand reveal. "The savior is none other than… Chiaki Nanami!"

Naturally, most in the room were confused because they didn't know the gamer by name. On the other hand, the six people she was expecting to get a reaction from was right on the money: Kyosuke looked surprised, Kazuo looked like he was in deep thought, Koichi looked amused, both Ryouta and Seiko had stunned expressions, and Miaya gave her a look that basically said, "What the hell are you thinking?"

"Interesting…" chuckled Koichi, tipping his fedora.

"Nanami?" muttered Ryouta. "You can't mean—"

"It's exactly what I mean," interrupted Chisa. "Your former classmate, my former student, and the former Ultimate Gamer herself. Could you put her profile on the screen for me, Gekkogahara?"

What is she thinking? thought Miaya, complying with Chisa's request. Is this what Chiaki has been keeping from me?

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Kyosuke in an aggressive tone.

Chisa wanted to burst into laughter since Kyosuke almost never talked to her like that. It was her way of knowing the statements were really starting to dig under his skin. Since he wanted to be the savior of mankind himself, it must've been insulting to hear one of his closest friends thought an average teenage girl was more capable than him.

"This isn't a place for your jokes. You can't seriously be suggesting this girl is what the Future Foundation needs."

"Sorry, Kyosuke, but I'm completely serious about this."

He was taken aback by the stiffness of her voice. He knew she wasn't playing around right now, but that only made it seem even more absurd.

"But…get real, Yukizome," commented Juzo, still trying to understand. "Everyone in this room would be more qualified than her. Hell, I've got newbies in my own division who'd be better. She'd be useless in a fight, and she's not some kind of genius from what her profile says."

"What is your take, Kizakura?" asked Gozu. "It says you played a role in scouting her. Did you notice anything?"

"I think that might be stretching it," he replied before taking a drink out of his canister. "All I ever did was have one conversation with her. She was the loner-type but seemed like a nice girl who wanted to know how her talent could be useful. I didn't notice anything odd about her, and I certainly didn't think she was some kind of savior."
"I don't want to pile on, Yukizome," began Daisaku, "but the only accomplishment of note she has is being her class's representative for over a year. While it is impressive, I'm afraid that's not very unique."

"Pfft," squealed Ruruka, trying her best not to start convulsing into a fit of laughter. "Let me get this straight... The world is undergoing an epidemic on an international scale, and its greatest hope is some otaku gamer who's apparently the savior. Is that right, Yukizome?"

"I think you got the gist of it, yes."

"Ahaha!" exploded Ruruka. The sheer craziness of what was being suggested overwhelmed her. She laughed for the better part of a minute before calming down. Her face was red and a tear fell. "For what it's worth, I nominate Seiko as the savior!" Ruruka stuck out her tongue while Seiko glared at her.

"Yukizome," began Kazuo, "what you're saying is bizarre. At least if she was proficient in computers or programming, she could be apart of Gekkogahara's division...but I don't even see any history of that. No matter what angle I look at it from, I don't see how this girl could be all that you've built her up to be."

"This," began Chisa, "is why the Future Foundation is doomed to fail."

As expected, her straightforward response was met with both skeptical and offended looks. Before anyone could respond, she put her hand up. So far, it was going how she thought it would. This next part was going to be the most crucial. Depending on how she played this, she'll either have what she wants or be forced to adjust her methods.

"You all have completely missed the point of what I said," she stated, hopping off the table. "The first thing everyone went to were things like intellect or appearance. If the failure of Hope's Peak Academy should've taught us one thing, it's we put too much stock in things we can plainly see. Sure she's not the smartest, most beautiful, or the most gifted...but she has a certain ability. It could be the most powerful and destructive ability a human can have—the ability to make others follow you."

"...Elaborate," said Kazuo.

"When I first met her, she was everything Kizakura described. So imagine my surprise when that same person managed to make her class coexist better than I ever could, and part of my talent is making sure the people around me are happy."

"She got a bunch of kids to get along," commented Ruruka. "Big deal."

"As usual, Ando, your views are too superficial."

"What did you just—"

"Look deeper," commanded Chisa. "All of us are adults and Hope's Peak alumni. By all counts, we are the best of the best—and we still can't fully cooperate. Even during a catastrophic event like this, we can't quite let go of our egos. Think of how amazing it is that a girl with a low-class talent managed to make a bunch of egotistical teenagers cooperate."

"Putting it like that makes it sound impressive," said Gozu. "How does that mean she's the savior?"

"Because...she was able to adapt and evolve her methods to be as effective as possible. I don't know how familiar any of you are with games, but they often have you develop strategies and
predict outcomes to give you the best chance of victory. While I was working in the Reserve Course, that's exactly what she did. I doubt she even realized she was doing it—it was all natural. That in itself…is a terrifying thing."

Chisa looked around to see some looks of indifference. She knowingly exaggerated a few things to make it sound better, but she truly believed the main point she was making. Just as despair and chaos come to Junko, she felt the only person that was her foil was Chiaki. If she was right about her fatal flaw, Chiaki is the only one who could take advantage.

"One of my favorite people from history is Joan of Arc," stated Chisa. "I can't say whether some god decided anything, but it's a fact that having her there changed the morale. I believe that Chiaki can be something like that for us."

"Heh," laughed Koichi. "It didn't end well for her, you know?"

"I'll see that it ends well this time around."

"...I don't know," added Kazuo. "You'd make an amazing promoter, Yukizome, but accepting such a case is hard to do."

"You said you'd like to change how the Future Foundation does things, Chairman Tengan. You won't find a solution like this again."

Thankfully, the old chairman seemed to be giving it serious thought. Assuming no one interfered, Chisa knew Kazuo would be open to inducting Chiaki among their ranks. She was already prepared to negotiate her position in the organization. The most realistic outcome would be a position in her division.

"Yukizome," began Kazuo, finally coming to a decision, "one month. If Chiaki Nanami can be physically and mentally healthy enough to carry out the duties appointed to her, we'll hold a majority vote to decide whether she'll be inducted as head of the Thirteenth Division. If she passes, she'll overlook newer recruits until it's decided what field they'll work in."

This is better than I even hoped! thought Chisa, barely containing her excitement. With something like this...

"A month?" asked Seiko. "I don't think that will be—"

"Deal!" yelled Chisa. "In one month's time, she'll be standing right in this room—ready to join!" Chisa internally rejoiced over her successful venture.

"If there is nothing else," began Kazuo, waiting to see if anybody else had something to say, "you're all dismissed."

VVV

"I don't know about this, Yukizome," said Usami. After the meeting, the two division leaders were having a conversation in an empty hallway. "She's still in such a sensitive condition…"

"I have complete trust in you. Believe me when I say she'll be ready in time. Just tell her everything that's happened, and it'll be fine. I have a few things to handle before I can see her again."

"Can you at least explain this... savior thing a little more? What exactly do you mean?"

"It's simple. She's the only one that can stop what's coming. If this doesn't work…all of it will
mean nothing." With those ambiguous words, Chisa left Miaya to the task she appointed her.

*I might've been a little too forward,* thought Chisa, thinking she should handle her character a bit more carefully. *I'm sure Chiaki won't refuse. If she does...* Chisa had to grab her arm to keep her thoughts from running haywire. *I could take other measures. Meanwhile, I think it's time I started working on my own despair video...*
Save the Moativator

*Goodness*...thought Miaya, adjusting her headphones in Chiaki's hospital room. Her patient was reading a manga she recommended about the comical daily life of a girl trying to be popular. She still never laughed or smiled, but the gamer seemed to be enjoying the series because she was reading every volume. *How am I going to do this?*

She was trying to think of the most favorable way to break the news about yesterday's decision. Miaya didn't like her taking on such responsibilities in the vulnerable state she was in, but the chairman already made his decision, and Chisa was adamant about her claim that Chiaki was the savior. The former Ultimate Therapist could safely assume Chiaki wasn't aware of what Chisa had proposed. Explaining something she wasn't completely sure about wasn't an ideal situation, but she would have to try.

"Are you enjoying the story?" asked Usami.

Chiaki gave a slight nod before she said, "I don't read a lot of manga, but this is probably the best one I've seen."

"I thought you might like it. I don't read much manga either, but I would always look forward to reading any new volumes that came out for this one. I don't think there will be any updates for a while, however, hehe."

"She never really succeeds, but it's cool how she tries her best without some kind of amazing talent."

"It's always surprising how fantasy can soothe the mind." During this little back and forth, Miaya was still internally debating the best method for the reveal. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"I'm going to say a word, and I want you to tell me what that word means to you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Is this going to be like that game therapists do where you say a word, and I say the first thing that pops into my head?"

"It's kind of like that; however, your response doesn't have to be limited to one word."

"Okay..." She didn't think anything of this request. It was surprising it took this long for Miaya to try this activity on her. Afterward, Chiaki wouldn't be shocked if she tried the inkblot trick next.

*I need to be direct with this,* thought Miaya, who already had the word she wanted to say in mind. "Savior."

The moment this word was spoken, the gamer felt like her heart had skipped a beat. All it took was that simple six letter word to destroy her composure. She bit her tongue to make pain force her calmness to return, but it was futile.

That sudden emotional response told Miaya everything she wanted to know in only a second of observation. "I'm going to say another word."

"..." She didn't have anything to say in response. The gamer was too afraid to look in Miaya's direction.
"Yukizome."

If it wasn't obvious before, it was now. The gamer balled her palms together; her eyes were cast downward while her pupils were darting back and forth. It was similar to a criminal about to crack under an interrogation. As her therapist, the emotions she was reading right now couldn't be anything else but fear.

"At the meeting yesterday, Yukizome said you would be the Future Foundation's trump card and that you were supposed to be the savior. In one month, if you're mentally and physically healthy enough, you'll be inducted into the Future Foundation as head of the Thirteenth Division."

Miaya didn't waste time giving the situation to her straight. Right now, Chiaki was like a book slowly revealing its contents. As harsh as it might seem, she'd be able to get a more faithful response out of her this way.

Meanwhile, the distraught girl's mind was moving too fast for her to fully compose herself. Chisa telling her about the insane plan was one thing, but hearing from Miaya that she promoted her as the savior in front of the leaders of the Future Foundation was appalling.

To make matters worse, the housekeeper would continue to have her in a stranglehold. If she refused, she'd be killed. If she accepted, Chisa was going to make her into the savior using whatever methods she felt like.

Maybe I should just tell Miaya the truth… As always, any thought of rebellion was halted by fear. Just the possibility of something like her execution happening again overtook all judgment. Even if she could tell everyone, Miaya would most likely be the only believer. The thought of the backlash was too much to consider.

"When Yukizome brought your body in, she said you were tortured by Reserve Course students—is that really what happened that day?"

"…"

"No…it was something else wasn't it?" At this point, Miaya was starting to fear going any further. It wasn't intentional, but she was slowly starting to realize what she was beginning to suggest. If what she was starting to suspect turned out to be true, it could be cataclysmic. The truth can be helpful, but the desire for her to be incorrect was strong.

"Please…" mumbled Chiaki, wanting desperately for Miaya to let it go.

"Did Yukizome…do something else?"

"Stop it!" she exclaimed. Miaya was getting dangerously close to the truth, and her continued silence might as well have been a confession.

"I want to believe you, but there are too many inconsistencies in your behavior. Every time I bring up the woman you were close with, you become tense. If I didn't know whom Yukizome was, I'd guess she harmed you in some way."

"You're wrong," she replied, shaking her head. "If it wasn't for Ms. Yukizome, I would've never made friends at Hope's Peak Academy. She…saved me."

She shut herself away, thought Miaya. If I continue to push her, this really will turn into a police officer interrogating a suspect. That's not what I want, so I have to move this along. "Regardless of what happened, it doesn't change that Chairman Tengan has set a deadline. I don't know exactly
what Yukizome meant about you being the savior, but I need to know if this is something you want to pursue."

Of course, it wasn't something Chiaki wanted to pursue. She already made up her mind about not wanting to deal with hope, despair, or the Future Foundation. If the choice was truly up to her, she'd detach herself from all this madness. The thought of her friends crossed her mind, and then the form of Junko would be there making fun of her. It was like being caught in a loop of fear and indecision.

"If you don't want to do it, Chiaki, just say so. I'll personally make sure you'll be taken care of if you don't want to join the Future Foundation."

She wanted to refuse, but she knew that wasn't an option. The events of that day weighed too heavily on her heart, and she'd do anything to keep from feeling that helpless and broken again. Just when she was about to reluctantly respond, something unintentional happened—tears flowed down her face. Ever since her awakening, she had tried her best to keep it in, but that control had shattered.

"Chiaki…" Miaya tried to hand her a handkerchief to clear her face, but Chiaki buried it in her palms instead.

"I-I don't know what to do…"

It was hard to understand what she was saying, but Miaya understood. Regardless of what she was hiding, the person in front of her was clearly in pain. It might've been advantageous to get more information out of her grieving patient, but Miaya decided to do something else.

"…Huh?" murmured Chiaki, hearing what was Miaya sliding Usami's monitor to the side and getting out of her custom wheelchair. Now that she was standing up, it was obvious how small a woman she was since her heavy attire almost completely covered her form. Chiaki knew the therapist wasn't paralyzed and that she didn't spend all her time in the wheelchair, but seeing her standing up for the first time was enough to catch her attention.

Instead of saying anything, Miaya walked behind her wheelchair and gestured at Chiaki. She guessed Miaya was telling her to sit so she could take her somewhere. Her face had a bit of a red tone because the small therapist wasn't in her comfort zone, but her eyes seemed completely genuine.

After wiping her wet face a couple of times, Chiaki slowly lifted herself off the bed onto Miaya's wheelchair. With the owner positioned on the back, the therapist pushed some buttons on the wheelchair to make it steadily move.

VVV

Since waking up, she had never actually seen the halls of the Future Foundation building. If she had to estimate how many floors her room was up, based on looking out the window, Chiaki would guess it was around a dozen floors high. The thought of asking how big the building was and what it was being used for before were questions she never asked Miaya. She was suspicious, but it was best to stay quiet for now the gamer decided.

After exiting an elevator, they started traveling through the first-floor lobby. Chiaki barely blinked because a massive lobby full of people in business attires filled the area. Being isolated in a quiet room made her forget how loud an area full of people could be. The televisions placed everywhere only added to the overall noise.
All these people...thought Chiaki. Many men and women of varying ages could be seen conversing with each other. Some had serious expression while others seemed to be joking and smiling. Being exposed to a large group like this so suddenly made her feel anxious.

"Hey...is that—" began a woman, noticing the odd duo moving through the lobby. Shortly, lots of eyes were being placed in their direction. Barely audible murmurs could be heard while they traversed through the crowd. Chiaki, who was never all that comfortable being the center of attention unless her mind was preoccupied with a game, felt small right now. She glanced back at Miaya for support and saw quite the sight.

The Ultimate Therapist's face was an even brighter shade of red than before. Her expression was almost like a child who'd lost their mom in the mall. She realized this was all weird for her too. Miaya, who didn't like crowds either, was escorting her patient without being in her trusty wheelchair. Seeing her deal with this didn't cure her anxiety, but it did help to know she wasn't alone.

"Ms. Gekkogahara?" said a young man, stationed behind the lobby counter. His expression looked to be somewhere in between surprise and confusion. Instead of an explanation, Miaya pointed to a large set of doors on the other side of the lobby. "You want to enter Eden? Mr. Bandai isn't doing any work, so it should be fine."

Eden? thought Chiaki.

Miaya made the wheelchair travel towards the mysterious area. Upon arriving at the doors, two people appeared and opened them—revealing a long, dark hallway with a faint light at the end. The noise from the lobby faded as they traveled farther down the tunnel. Chiaki was holding her breath in anticipation while the light continued to get bigger.

Finally, when they arrived at the light, it led to another room. The moment the gamer saw the room, her jaw dropped. "T-this is..." she murmured.

In front of Chiaki was the most incredible collection of plants she had ever seen. It was like someone ripped a tropical forest from the ground and placed it here. Her senses were overwhelmed by a variety of sensations: smells invaded her nose, the moist air tickled her skin, and an impressive assortment of colors entered her vision. Another intriguing feature was what appeared to be a blue sky but was actually a fake one with bright, hot lights scattered around.

"What is this...?"

"Eden," answered Miaya, which surprised the supposed savior. This was the first instance she had heard her voice. It was soft and light as if it was something that hadn't been used in a long time.

"...Why did you bring me here?"

Instead of an answer, Miaya made the wheelchair move once more. The game couldn't help but think how the amount of care and precision needed to take care of this many different species of plant life must be daunting. She figured that an Ultimate was likely responsible for this. That, or a very large assortment of people dedicated to gardening.

After a few minutes, Miaya stopped the wheelchair in front of a peculiar wall. It looked to be made out of dark-gray marble, and there were words inscribed across it in various places.

"This project was developed and spearheaded by Bandai. One purpose Eden has is to be a storage area for plants. The newer purpose is it serves as one of the memorials for everyone who's died
since the Tragedy began."

The gamer could tell there were hundreds of names scattered around. In such a short time, these many deaths were on record for just the Future Foundation. It terrified her to think of the total number of casualties there have been since this all begun.

"I wanted this to give you perspective. Most of the people you saw in the lobby are new; I don't want it to be true, but most of them won't last throughout the year."

"…What do you want me to do? I tried once, and I failed. Do you really think someone like me could do anything for one of them?"

"I'm not trying to guilt you into deciding. It's unfair, but I needed to make you see that decisions made through hesitation and doubt won't help—especially now. That's the kind of world we live in."

"…I'm afraid."

"That's perfectly normal."

"A nobody like me couldn't save her friends."

"Despite Yukizome's avant-garde proclamations, I do agree with her to some degree. I think you do have a certain gift that can make a difference."

"You…think I could?"

"I do."

"…Even if I haven't been completely honest?"

"One thing I'm sure of is your someone who makes the world better."

Miaya sounded sure and decisive. Despite her almost never using it, her voice had a special assurance in it. It would make anyone think that the words coming out of her mouth couldn't be anything but honest.

Still, Chiaki felt afraid. No matter how helpful and smart Miaya was, it couldn't lighten all the worries that plagued her.

"This might be a weird way to phrase it, but sometimes—" Miaya paused for a moment. "—if you just do it, things will work out."

The gamer gasped before glancing back at the small therapist. It wasn't intentional, and she didn't even realize when it started—but upon hearing those words being said, the gamer did something she hasn't done since waking up from her coma. It was faint—but she smiled at Miaya. The therapist gently smiled back at her.

There might've been a more proper response to this situation, but the gamer followed her gut and pushed off the arms of the wheelchair. Since being awake, she hasn't tried to walk on her own strength yet. She stumbled and awkwardly fell to the ground before using all her strength to get to her knees. After that, she used the wall as support.

"Hey!" exclaimed Miaya in quietest shout Chiaki had ever heard.

"I don't think I'll ever really be happy again, and I'll probably fail…but I'll do it, Miaya."
"Do you mean…?"

"I agree to be the head of the Thirteenth Division."
The main headquarters of the Future Foundation is the most pivotal center of operations. Its importance is further amplified because both the chairman and vice chairman were stationed there. It was also considered the prime location for any major gathering of division leaders. However, rarely would anybody not stationed there visit since it's located on an undisclosed island in the middle of the ocean, which meant any means of transportation would be by air or water.

So, it was natural for the former Ultimate Student Council President to be surprised upon seeing someone he doesn't normally converse with.

"Kizakura?" thought Kyosuke, spotting the man in the fedora leaning against the wall like he was waiting for someone.

"Ah, Munakata," he greeted with a smile. "Great day for a walk, right?"

"Shouldn't you be out in the field recruiting more Future Foundation agents?" he replied in his usual blunt manner while walking past Koichi.

The former Ultimate Scout placed his hands in his pockets before following. "I had important business to take care of regarding Hope's Peak Academy."

"Has something happened?"

"Nah, not really. Jin had a certain request. He wanted some defensive mechanisms built around the school for protection."

Kyosuke raised an eyebrow. "The chairman authorized that?"

"He didn't see a problem with it. We've been keeping a close eye on Hope's Peak. Not a single person has been seen entering the school, so it's safe to conclude the only people residing there is the seventy-eighth class along with Jin. Now, not a single person should be able to get in."

"Or out," he added, narrowing his eyes. "You and Tengan should've dragged former Headmaster Kirigiri along with the kids. Turning the school into a fortress so he can play house with his daughter—it's ridiculous."

"Oh..." the recruiter stated. "Don't tell me you're angry they decided to survive on their own instead of integrating into your beloved Future Foundation?" Koichi spoke in a light manner, but he realized he might've pushed a few too many buttons when Kyosuke glared at him. "Do you have to act like a corporate businessman all the time?"

"I'm not acting," he replied, clenching his fist. "If I was more insightful at the time, I could've stopped this. I should've visited Hope's Peak earlier and put the Steering Committee in a stranglehold until they told me everything."

"Heh," laughed Koichi while taking a swig. "Could've, should've—that's all pointless now. All we can do is work with the cards we've been dealt, and move forward. That's what it means to believe in the future, don't you think?"
"…" Kyosuke looked away since he couldn't think of a meaningful reply.

"Besides, we don't want our potential new division leader to think the Future Foundation is run by a bunch of brooding adults."

"You don't actually think that girl will pass, do you?"

"Don't tell me the savior doesn't have your vote?"

Koichi thought the subject was an amusing one to discuss, but it was quickly becoming a nuisance to Kyosuke. News of the girl that was in a coma potentially becoming head of the Thirteenth Division spread throughout the organization, and it annoyed him every time he heard about it. Chisa's unfailing confidence in the former Ultimate Gamer only made it that much more frustrating.

"This notion someone like Chiaki Nanami is the Future Foundation's trump card is insulting. It's outrageous to accept her as the savior and make her a division leader."

"Don't you think you're being overly cynical? Yukizome seemed to believe what she was saying. I've never seen her be so passionate about something."

"She feels guilty for what happened to her class, so Yukizome's made it her prerogative to help her former student be in the best possible position, similar to Ryouta Mitarai. That's all this is."

"Well, I still think the whole thing is engrossing. Maybe she'll do something that will impress even you."

Kyosuke didn't so much as acknowledge that comment, which was his way of saying there was no way it would happen.

"Still…recovering from wounds like that in such a short amount of time is beyond belief. Maybe, there's something more to all this…"

"…What are you suggesting?" Instead of a definitive answer, Kyosuke was surprised when Koichi put an arm around him.

"Nothing really. Now, what do you say we get a certain former Ultimate Bartender to make us some drinks?"

Kyosuke sighed before answering. "I'll have to decline."

"Heh, I'll catch you slipping one of these days."

VVV

So this is what a character feels like when they're grinding for experience points, thought Chiaki, sweating bullets while trying to walk across the floor. The former Ultimate Gamer decided to become head of the Thirteenth Division, and that meant having to focus on her health for the next month. It started with trying to walk on her own power with help from an appointed trainer.

"Ugh," grunted Chiaki, losing her footing and beginning to fall. Before she hit the ground, a certain masked man caught her.

"Do you wish to keep going?" asked Gozu, supporting her small frame with one of his massive arms.
"Yes," she replied, wiping the sweat from her forehead before struggling back to her feet. "I can keep going...probably."

Miaya herself enlisted the help of the former Ultimate Wrestler to assist with her recovery. She concluded he would be more capable of handling this stage of Chiaki's therapy since a more hands-on approach wasn't her strongest area.

Funnily enough, the boisterous methods of Gozu weren't unfamiliar territory for the gamer; a few of her classmates were similar. Despite the Great Gozu's acumen with physical training, it was still a tough process.

_I might actually die..._ thought Chiaki, trying her best to carry on while jogging around the indoor track field in a plain gym uniform. As Gozu passed her, it would officially be the third time.

"Come on, Nanami! You have to conquer the part of your mind wanting to rest! Press forward!"

"I-I never was that good in gym class," she replied through ragged breaths. "The only time I could really move around was when I was playing a game that required it. Although, I think I'm as bad at dancing games as I am with dating sims."

"That's too bad," replied Gozu, taking something out of his pocket.

Once Chiaki saw it, her eyes lit up immediately before she uttered, "Is that...the Nantendo Game Girl Ultra?"

"Gekkogahara told me to give this to you if you did well enough. According to her, this device—"

"It was Nantendo's next console after the Game Girl Advanced," she replied, cutting him off while not taking her eyes off the sleek portable device. "It was supposed to debut a few months from now but couldn't because of the Tragedy. It's said to have twice the battery life, a better resolution, the ability to play and handle all the old games perfectly with no frame drop, and is supposed to come with its own custom state of the art web browser. In addition, it can project to any modern television along with great multiplayer servers and streamer friendly features...if I'm remembering right."

"Um, yeah..." Gozu wasn't sure how to respond to such a thorough and spontaneous outburst from the normally soft-spoken girl. He was aware of her passion for games, but the sudden reverse of demeanor was eye-opening.

"Can I try it out?"

He could practically see the stars in her eyes when she reached for the device as if she was a toddler reaching for a cookie. He said, "It's all yours—if you can capture it!"

He didn't give her time to respond before he started running. Anyone would try harder if there was an incentive. Chiaki was interested in the object, so he would use this opportunity to see how far she could go. _She'll never catch me if I run at my full speed. I need to run slow enough for her to stay close, but I also can't let her overtake me too quickly._

The masked wrestler was running a little less than half his full speed. He tried to maintain this pace to see how the trainee would fare. While glancing over his shoulders, with the console in hand like bait on a fishing rod, he hoped Chiaki would at least be a few meters behind him. What he saw made him gasp. She's...

Close behind him, almost within arm's length, was the gamer swiftly closing the gap. Her eyes
were focused and steely while they were locked onto the console in his large hand. Gozu didn't know whether to be surprised or amazed while witnessing this new influx of energy. Even half his speed should still be faster than an average person, let alone a young girl on the road to recovery.

Nevertheless, she was right on his flank and would capture her prize soon. He was about to increase his speed, but then something else unexpected happened. The determined girl lunged forward as if she was jumping from an explosion, and snatched her prize out of his grip. He was so surprised by her effort, he dropped his guard for a second—which was all she needed.

"I-I...h-have it..." She was harshly breathing, her face was red with exhaustion, and it looked like she'd lose consciousness any second. Regardless, she held the device in her hands like the Holy Grail.

"I should've tried this earlier..."

It was hard, and it wouldn't be truthful to say there weren't moments she wanted to give up. However, while there were times she would bend, the gamer never broke. The hardship she was going through was nothing compared to her execution. The girl couldn't pinpoint exactly where the determination was coming from. Even so, Chiaki knew quitting wasn't a luxury she had.

Currently, there was a week until the official vote was to be held. Chiaki was hoping since she'd made such progress, Gozu might take it easier—she was wrong.

"O-one...!" she gasped, her arms shaking under her. The exercise they were doing was some basic push-ups in the training facility. She'd managed to do one, which was a far cry from the fifty one-handed push-ups Gozu currently had. Even the comprehensive massaging of her joints that Gozu gave provided daily didn't make her feel nimble enough to accomplish this act.

"Let your passion drive you!" yelled Gozu, moving like an enraged bull. "You must laugh in the face of weakness! That's what it means to persevere!"

"I think being really muscly helps," she added, trying with all her strength to do another push-up. "T-two...!" She let her tired arms free before colliding with the ground. "How many do I have left?"

"Two down—ninety-eight to go!"

Observing the duo's training session from afar was Miaya and Seiko. Miaya always observed Chiaki's progress—and Seiko happened to have some free time, so she decided to look for herself. The progress she was making was surprising to the division leaders. Even the petite therapist herself didn't think it'd be going this smoothly.

It's been three weeks since Chiaki's road to physical recovery started, and the results were nothing short of spectacular. Her movement was as normal as they were before her execution, and she had complete control over her bodily functions. Her mental health still remained to be seen, and her numerous scars—visible and internal—would never truly fade, but her condition was considerably improving.

"This is unbelievable..." stated Seiko. "It hasn't even been two months, and she's moving normally with no damage to her motor skills."

"It's a marvelous recovery," added Usami. "Considering the shape she was in, it's amazing she's alive."

"If it's true the cause was torture by Reserve Course students, why go to such lengths? I know the
Despairs do insane things, but it seemed like someone had a vendetta. There was no other recorded case like Nanami’s around Hope’s Peak Academy.

"Are you familiar with the term lingchi?"

Seiko pondered it for a second. "Isn't that a form of torture?"

"It was a torture method developed by China long ago. The process is, basically, restraining the victim and slowly cutting them with a sharp object. Professionals could cut and mutilate hundreds of times without their victim perishing. Seeing the precision of the wounds on Chiaki's body reminded me of that. There's no question she was deliberately tortured, and most of her injuries were by a similar weapon."

"Her case does sound like that, but what does it mean?"

"If something like that happened, I would think her attackers must've captured her for quite some time. Just when did she go missing, and how long did it take for someone to find her body?"

"According to Yukizome, Chiaki disappeared the day the Reserve Course students committed mass suicide. Then, about a day afterward, she searched the school grounds to see if there were any survivors. She found Chiaki's body in a shed on the outskirts of the campus. Her body was brought to this building for treatment."

"So how was it possible for her to heal like that in a single day? Her injuries suggested it must've been several months since she was tortured."

Seiko's eyebrows raised. "I get what you're saying. Does that mean Yukizome wasn't honest with the exact time she went missing?"

"Is there any way to sustain injuries like that and recover so rapidly?"

"There's no way someone could live through such injuries in a short amount of time—let alone heal. The longest I think someone could survive would be a couple of minutes before the body shuts down. Even if a miracle happened and the individual stayed alive long enough, there's no treatment that could save her that I know of. Something like that…would take borderline sorcery."

Miaya looked at the ground after Seiko confirmed what she thought. That contradiction had been bothering her awhile. It all pointed to Yukizome being incorrect about what occurred. Whether it was about the time frame or what actually happened was unknown. What was bothering her most of all was if Chisa was lying, it's almost certain she wanted to cover something up.

"Do you think she felt too ashamed to admit the truth?" asked Seiko. "It must've been hard accepting most of her students were likely dead, and one was in a coma."

"I suppose that could be true..." There was a disconnect somewhere in Chisa's testimony, and the therapist couldn't definitively say what it was. She decided to bring up the matter to the former Ultimate Housekeeper directly. Conspiring and doubting her co-workers wasn't an activity she enjoyed, but the answers to this mystery were too important.

After the tense conversation was over, Miaya and Seiko turned their attention back to the mismatched duo. It was comical seeing the passionate and larger Gozu trying to motivate the exhausted and smaller Chiaki. Seiko couldn't help but smile behind her mask at the sight. "Why did you pick Gozu?"

"There are multiple ways you can go about physical therapy, but I decided this method would be
most effective. Considering what Gozu's past profession was, I thought he would be best for the job. Some people might roll their eyes at professional wrestling since it's fake, but it's something that takes complete dedication to your craft and conditioning. I was reading over some of Gozu's accolades, and he suffered an injury that should've kept him out for over ten months—he came back in just two."

"He must've faith in what Yukizome said if he dropped everything to help out."

"All I did was explain the situation, and he happily agreed. Gozu is the type of person who'll drop everything to help someone in a flash. It's just the kind of man he is."

"After putting it that way, I can see why you chose him."

"That's it!" exclaimed Gozu. "Just a few more!"

"S-seven…!" gasped the tired gamer.

"I think we should stop him before her heart explodes, however," stated Seiko, rubbing the back of her head.

"Heh…you might be right."

VVV

Chiaki was lying on her hospital bed, staring at the ceiling. She hasn't been deemed healthy enough yet, so Chiaki was forced to continue staying in this room for the time being. She made a conscious effort to move as little as possible, her body being sore. Since she'd been training for weeks now, the aching gamer thought the soreness would start to fade quicker. It wasn't bad enough to cause her agony, but it still felt debilitating.

There's only a week left…the girl thought, wondering what her fate would be.

Whether or not the leaders of the Future Foundation would accept her, she couldn't foresee. The number of division leaders she was friendly with wasn't small, but that still didn't spur her confidence. Looking at it from a business point of view, she didn't know why anybody would vote for her. However, Chisa had an agenda, making it impossible to know what kind of tricks she might pull.

Everyone…

She began thinking of her time at Hope's Peak more freely as time went on. Of course, the bad memories would surface every now and again, but it was an improvement from when she could barely think of her friends without going into a panic attack. Her demeanor was still that of someone with lots of stress, and the only time she ever genuinely smiled was around Miaya. Calling herself happy still seemed like something she could never be, but Chiaki was improving day by day. For whatever reason, there was still one problem that wasn't fading…

"You don't honestly consider me a problem, do you?" asked the fake Junko, sitting on the bed. "I'm like your biggest supporter. I could even start a fan club for you, not that it would be a fraction of mine—it's the thought that counts."

"What do you want?" the annoyed gamer asked, not taking her eyes off the ceiling.

"Your best friend can't check up on you?"
"You're not my friend."

"Everything you're doing is playing right into that housekeeper's hands. All you are is a puppet captured on her strings."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Beat her at her own game!" she exclaimed with a sly grin. "Just follow your despair and do what feels right—she'll never see it coming."

"I'll never be like you."

"Ouch. Well, you'll come around. The moment you mess up or that chaos-loving bitch gets bored... she'll kill you." There was a knocking at the door. "We have a visitor."

Chiaki looked towards the door and then back at Junko to see her form had vanished. She narrowed her eyes in dismay before more knocks on the door snapped her out of it. "Come in!" The door opened to reveal a face she hadn't seen since the day of her awakening.

"Hello, my little cinnamon roll," greeted the smiling face of Chisa.

Chiaki averted her gaze. She felt her heartbeat instantly increased because the crazed housekeeper entered the room.

"We haven't seen each other in a while. Are you feeling well?"

"I-I'm fine..."

"Heh," laughed Chisa, licking her lips before closing the door behind her. "Let's talk."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

Lingchi—translated variously as death by a thousand cuts, the slow process, the lingering death, or slow slicing; it's a legit form of torture that was used. If you look it up, it's pretty similar to what Chiaki suffered in her execution. It sounds right up Junko's dark, demented alley.
Save the Dark Horse

Chiaki let the warm, soothing water overtake her body. According to Miaya, this water had therapeutic properties that helped calm the mind. She silently relaxed in a long pod, and her head rested above the water. Since she was alone in the dim room—it was filled with similar pods—there was a peaceful silence resonating throughout the area. Despite how great the water felt, she couldn't help but let her mind wander to a conversation she had previously.

VVV

"You've been making a remarkable effort," said Chisa, sitting next to Chiaki's bed.

The cautious gamer didn't know what her former teacher wanted to discuss, but she couldn't imagine it being favorable.

"That optimistic glow I saw when you were attending Hope's Peak Academy hasn't returned, but I guess that's only natural."

"…" Chiaki would answer if Chisa wanted, but she preferred not to respond when she could.

"Oh, so when Gekkogahara comes rolling in you're all smiles—but when I arrive you become mute?" Chisa started rubbing her eyes like she was crying, which she clearly wasn't. "Can it be that…I've been replaced in your heart?"

Chiaki sighed while trying to decide whether the fake Junko or Chisa was more exhausting. She exasperatingly asked, "What do you need, Ms. Yukizome?"

"I thought going over how to present you would be nice," she replied, smiling once more. "You've never had a job interview before, have you?" The gamer shook her head. "All you have to do is keep your head up, make eye contact, and sound confident."

"Will they really accept me?"

"I've gone over how I think it'll go based on what I know about the division leaders. Before that, let me explain how the actual vote works. I'm assuming you haven't been told?" Chiaki shook her head again. "After all the preliminary talk is done, the vote will start with the newest division leader and end with the chairman. If you get the majority vote—you're golden. However, there are some special points worth knowing."

"Special?"

"Chairman Tengan's vote counts as two. Also, Kyosuke has the ability to terminate the entire vote, even after authorization from the chairman if he has a probable cause. Luckily, he has no evidence you're lying about a single thing, so that shouldn't be a problem. The real challenge is going to be the vote itself. I've basically been your campaign manager because I've been putting in a good word for you everywhere. I think I deserve a thank you."

Even though Chiaki wondered claiming her to be the savior like some deranged heretic was good, Chisa's narrow eyes intimidated her into speaking. "Thank you, Ms. Yukizome."

"Only the best for my little shortcake," she replied, pinching the gamer's cheek, making her wince. "If I had to guess what the results would be…I'd say eight to five in your favor. That might variate somewhat, but unless we get a major curveball thrown our way—it should be fine."
"...Why did you tell them I'm the savior...and why would you want me to be a division leader anyway?"

"Well, I really do believe you're the savior," she replied before giggling. "I needed to make you seem like an amazing individual. Whenever someone promotes an object or event, it's important to capture the attention of your target audience. Just saying you're a responsible, kind-hearted girl might work in some kiddie anime—but it would've been laughable in the face of the Future Foundation. My challenge was making a quiet gamer seem like a crucial asset."

"...And you think I'm the savior because I'm the opposite of Junko."

"Now you're getting it. There's a stark contrast between you two, unlike anything I've examined up close. Therefore, you're the only one who can become what I desire."

"You mean—you're going to paint me into something different," added Chiaki, remembering what Chisa said the first day.

"It's convenient you bring that up because it's why I want you to be a division leader. You'll be given automatic clearance to multiple things a simple agent couldn't do, including working with me on some projects."

"What projects?" The gamer shuddered because it sounded like a more tame way to say experiments.

"First of all, I'm going to teach you to be more efficient. Despite you possessing the potential to be the savior, you wouldn't last a day out in the field against the Despairs. Also...I'll give you an immunity to despair itself."

*Immunity to despair?* Whatever that could mean was a total mystery. It sounded as if Chisa had a method to make despair itself ineffective. How and why someone who craves despair could do that only made it more confusing. "How's that possible?"

"You'll see. I'm sure making you the savior has made me work harder than being a housekeeper ever did."

"But, what happens if I fail the vote?"

"If something bothersome like that happened," began the division leader, developed a malevolent smirk, "I suppose I'll have to improvise."

The frightened girl gulped, knowing improvising could mean a myriad of things—none of which was good.

"Just focus on working hard this final week. If you even have a little of that same girl who was unanimously voted the class rep, it'll be simple."

The gamer was silent as the stakes were set. If she became the Thirteenth Division leader, Chisa would begin transforming her. Failure meant the methods would be altered, but the outcome would be the same. As always, everything went as the housekeeper wanted.

"I even prepared a nice Future Foundation attire for you. As well as...another accessory I thought was neat." The maid smiled while her former student still refused to look at her. "It'd be in your best interest if you get used to me again, Chiaki. You might've thought your rehabilitation with Gekkogahara was tough, but that was only the prolog. We're just getting started..."
With those chilling words, Chisa rose and began to depart. There was a certain question the gamer still wanted to be answered that wasn't last time.

"Why are you doing all this—what's the point?" Chisa's, being the despair loving woman she now is, actions were perplexing. Chiaki was no investigator, but she knew there had to be some kind of motive for all this. It felt too superficial to decide Chisa was doing this for pure entertainment.

"The answer wouldn't matter; you can't stop it regardless." She left the room, leaving Chiaki without an answer again.

VVV

That uncomfortable conversation took place earlier in the week, and now it was the morning of the vote. She started to understand what Miaya meant by the water being therapeutic. The effects couldn't be felt at first, but now a feeling of aimlessly floating in a peaceful ocean was consuming her. In those moments, her body didn't seem to have a single care in the world.

"Chiaki," greeted Usami from a small monitor connected with the pod. "That should be enough now. I'll meet you in the locker room after I take care of some things. Also, Yukizome left something for you."

The gamer, somewhat reluctantly, exiting the pod. She covered herself with a towel and walked towards the locker room. After being in the dim room, the lights stung her eyes when she entered. Just as she happened to pass a mirror, she recalled looking at herself after the bandages were taken off. Her body was covered in scars from head to toe. Her body reminded her of a doll that had been torn apart, only to be sewed together again. It felt like it didn't sink in until then how insane it was she survived.

A minute later, she found some perfectly folded clothes along with some shoes and a note. The note basically said this was a gift from Chisa, and there were more identical sets. She also briefly bragged about how great her folding was. The gamer promptly tossed the note in the trash and dried herself off before trying them on. Knowing Chisa, Chiaki almost expected the clothes to explode the moment she tried them on.

After putting on her undergarments, she tried on the attire consisting of a black, hooded blazer on top of a white dress shirt with a dark ribbon. There was also a black skirt which was fastened to her with a belt combined with her favorite black thigh high socks and a pair of black boots.

*It fits perfectly*...thought Chiaki, moving around in the gear.

"My, look at you," chimed in Chisa, appearing like a silent assassin. Chiaki almost jumped at how suddenly she came out. "I wanted to make you look more professional while still keeping your normal style in mind, and I think it was a success."

It lasted for a second, but Chisa smiled the way she did when they first met. The gamer looked away before she fooled herself into believing the smile was genuine. She knew full well whom the person in front of her was.

"I need you to turn around."

Chiaki wondered why, but she decided it's less trouble just to comply with her demand. After that, she felt something fasten around her neck before hearing a clicking sound. She gasped while putting her hands around her neck to see what Chisa placed there.

"What is this?" Chiaki went to the mirror and saw a black choker placed around her neck.
"I said I had a special accessory for you—it won't come off, by the way." Chisa said that so casually, it took a moment for it to register with the gamer.

"Huh?" She tried to take it off, but it wasn't budging. The choker was causing her no discomfort, but the thought of Chisa placing something around her neck that never came off greatly bothered her. "Why did you put this on me?"

"...Consider it a good luck charm. It's a part of me that will always be with you."

It was frustrating how teasing and indirect the housekeeper would be when answering her questions. She quietly said, "You're crazy..."

"Did you just insult me?" Chisa looked genuinely offended before pulling out some sharp scissors.

Chiaki felt like screaming while the housekeeper slowly walked to her.

"Don't..." pleaded the gamer, backing into a locker without taking her eyes off the object. She started having trouble breathing because unpleasant memories began returning. As her former teacher drew closer, she covered her face with her arms and wished anybody would help. "Ms. Yukizome!"

She didn't know why those words came out of her mouth. It was like she hoped that would make the original Chisa return somehow.

A few seconds passed before she put her arms down and saw the friendly, smiling face of her former teacher inches away. "I'm just messing around, my cinnamon roll—I know I'm crazy."

The frightened girl breathed a sigh of relief before sliding to the ground.

"Allow me to cut that hair of yours."

It was both a frightful and fascinating experience having Chisa cut her hair. It was scary since having an insane woman hold a sharp object near the head and neck area wasn't ideal. On the other hand, sitting there while she was humming an old song made recollections of her old teacher appear. The way they looked was like a mother and daughter, minus the despair.

"Do you remember that time everyone in the class had a stomach virus?" asked Chisa.

Chiaki thought about it for a moment before she said, "You mean when Komaeda's luck made a delivery truck drop a box of pastries that turned out to be expired? The only reason we didn't get sick was because—"

"We were too full from that large lunch we ate earlier. We had to go to each of their dorms and take care of them."

"It was really hot that day."

"We did, indeed, do a lot of walking."

"My feet were sore for a week."

"Hey, at least you weren't wearing heels."

The two shared a laugh while they remembered a more peaceful time. That event happened before Chisa was reassigned to the Reserve Course, and it was one of many wacky things the seventy-seventh class experienced. Chiaki felt nice in that short moment until she inevitably remembered
how it ends.

*What am I doing…?* she thought, bringing herself back to reality.

She blamed herself. Chisa was turned into Ultimate Despair because she saved her. The gamer realized she wasn't uncomfortable around her former teacher just because of the threats—she was a constant reminder of her failure.

"All done!" stated Chisa, putting the scissors away.

Chiaki observed her hair in the mirror and saw it was similar to when she was attending Hope's Peak.

"I took the liberty of leaving it just a bit longer since I thought it looked better. If it wasn't for that sullen aura you have, you'd be your old self. I can make it shorter if you don't like it."

On the subject of her hair, she remembered the absence of her treasured hair clip. Since Chisa did rescue her body that day, Chiaki thought the auburn-haired maid might know where it is. "Do you know what happened to my *Gala Omega* hair clip?"

"That thing?" Chisa remembered the item was in the possession of Izuru the last time she saw it. "It couldn't be in a safer place right now." She could practically see the question mark over Chiaki's head. "If you want, I could try and retrieve it."

"Never mind, Ms. Yukizome" Chiaki decided it was best to let it go because Chisa was playing with her.

"Still referring to me so formally? It seems I'll have to steal back the admiration Gekkogahara took. I used to be your hero, after all."

"Where do I go now?" the gamer asked while ignoring the last comment.

"If you're ready, we'll depart immediately. You can ride in the helicopter with me."

"Can she come with me instead, Yukizome?" stated Usami while Miaya entered the room. "I promised I'd take her with me because we won't be seeing much of each other anymore…"

"I understand," answered Chisa, seeing her former student's face light up the moment the therapist entered the room. It wasn't unlike how Chiaki would look at her old self. "There's no problem here, so I'll go on ahead. See you in a few, Chiaki."

The Fifth Division leader departed, leaving the two quiet individuals alone.

"You look great!" complimented Usami.

"Thanks, Miaya," replied Chiaki, smiling. "Are we leaving now?"

"Yep. I know you're technically not my patient anymore, but you'll have to deal with me for a little while longer."

"I don't mind at all." With that, Miaya led Chiaki to their destination. Her expression darkened when she thought about the vote. *Sorry, Chiaki and Yukizome. I need the truth…*

VVV

The demented housekeeper was traveling through the hallways while thinking about Miaya's
appearance. *Those two are close. I wonder how much Gekkogahara figured out?*

She was aware that leaving Chiaki with the former Ultimate Therapist was a gamble since the truth could come out at any time. Of course, she didn't care because she had multiple plans to choose from if such a thing ever occurred. However, as she foresaw, it looked like Chiaki never revealed what really happened. Chisa still didn't delude herself into thinking Miaya wasn't able to pry some notable information from the vulnerable girl.

*I don't think she'll be a problem,* she thought, pulling out the specially issued phone that Future Foundation employees were issued. These phones could only connect to other Future Foundations phones because they were all powered by a special server. It was one of the first things Kyosuke ordered since using normal networks would be too risky.

*It really would be a shame to kill her. Gekkogahara's talents are still useful. There's that project to think about...*

Her thoughts were halted when the man she called picked up on the other end. "Yukizome?"

"Chiaki Nanami will be arriving shortly with Gekkogahara. I'm about to leave also, Kyosuke."

There was a silence on the other end. Chisa knew how infuriating this all was for her dear friend, but that only made it more enjoyable.

"I know you want the best for your students; however, if you think that girl can be this savior you claim—it won't end well."

"We both have our interpretations of what a savior is. In fact, let's make this a competition to see who is right in the end. I'm no Ultimate Gambler, but I have a feeling you'll lose this one."

"I'll agree this time if you want. Still, don't take today's events too personally in the future. All I want is the best for you, the girl, and everyone else threatened by despair. I'm responsible for the well-being of everyone in the Future Foundation, so understand I can't entertain fairy tales."

She giggled a little because a funny thought crossed her mind. "You two are more alike than you think; she also refuses to say my first name."

"What are you—"

"Make sure everyone is ready, alright Kyosuke? Remember… This is all for the sake of a successful future." She hung up before gleefully smiling. "I can't decide if Chiaki or Kyosuke is more fun to mess with. You still haven't fixed that habit of never giving things a second thought. We'll see who's right when it's over, Kyosuke."

VVV

The former Ultimate Gamer had her eyes glued outside the helicopter window. A luminescent sky could be seen with clouds scattered everywhere. She was so used to the dark clouds, the beauty of the regular blue sky was forgotten by her. The way the sun's rays sparkled on the water hypnotized her.

"It's a nice change of scenery, right?" added Usami, noticing Chiaki's fascination. "The pollution hasn't spread this far, yet." As Miaya explained before, the Despairs were intentionally sending harmful fumes into the atmosphere all over the world.

"Why would anyone want to do that...?"
"That's just how the Despairs are hardwired. They want to ravage everything, including the air we breathe."

She narrowed her eyes while wishing for the beautiful scenery to be preserved, just like Eden. Over an hour had passed before the Future Foundation's main headquarters came into view. The helicopter landed, and the gamer took her first steps on the base. Her mouth opened, while she observed the tall building. It looked like a spear protruding from the Earth and on its way to pierce the sky.

"Impressive, isn't it?" added Usami after Miaya departed the helicopter, thanks to the ramp. "This building was undergoing construction for years. It was supposed to be a unique project regarding Hope's Peak Academy, but circumstances changed its purpose to serve as the main headquarters of the Future Foundation."

"It looks amazing…"

"Wait until you see the inside. The technology here is unreal; it might be the most advanced place on Earth."

Chiaki looked around the area like a tourist on vacation while entering the building. It took a while because they had to get clearance past multiple layers of security, but they eventually walked through the massive doors. If the lobby at the other base made her feel overwhelmed, this one figuratively suffocated her. Warm air hit her body while she witnessed many Future Foundation agents scattered around. The gamer didn't know what to focus on first since there was a cluster of sights to see.

"We shouldn't waste time," added Usami. "Our floor is pretty high." She was reminded of Miaya's shyness when the therapist looked a little sheepish.

After navigating through the bustling area, they entered an elevator—an act the gamer wasn't fond of because of the memories—and patiently waited while they ascended to the desired floor. Thankfully, there weren't many people in the elevator with them, so it didn't take long to arrive. Miaya led them to the outside of the conference room where the vote would be held. The sounds of conversation could already be heard.

"It seems we're a little late," said Usami. "Until someone calls you, wait patiently for the time being."

"Alright…"

Miaya noticed her anxiety and gave her a warm smile to which the gamer smiled back in reassurance. After she entered the room, Chiaki was left alone in the hallway.

She could hear talking being done. Chiaki had met some of the division leaders, but a good number of them were still strangers. Thoughts of the vote going disastrously kept passing her mind. The girl decided to calm herself down the best way she knew how—playing a game.

"Playing that thing won't solve your problem," stated someone in front of her. Chiaki was surprised to see the imaginary form of Junko during the day. "Need some advice?"

"Not from you," she replied, putting her device down.

"Well, I'll give you some anyway." The blond woman made a serious expression. "You need to raise hell and challenge them. Tell those Future Foundation bastards how pointless it all is."
"I won't do this your way. I just have to do it and not hesitate, like Miaya said."

"Keep telling yourself that, nobody." She cockily grinned. "You know I'm right. Why else would you call me?"

"You can enter now!" yelled a female voice Chiaki guessed was Yukizome. The gamer took a deep breath before glaring at Junko.

"You're wrong."

"Huh?" The fake fashionista looked surprised.

"This isn't pointless!"

"Heh…" Junko averted her gaze. "Just know once you do this, there's no turning back. This route you've decided to take is just gonna end with nothing but more despair."

Chiaki walked passed Junko's form and put her hands on the doors.

"…Don't come again." After that, she opened the doors and prepared herself for whatever destiny had in store.
Save the Dark Horse II

When Chiaki first imagined how the leaders of the Future Foundation would look when together, she thought of a group of impressive business people that welcomed everyone with a warm smile. That was her natural cognition in regards to what a bunch of individuals united against despair for the sake of the future was like.

The vibe she felt from the group sitting at the long table in front of her felt nothing like that.

"Chiaki Nanami," greeted Kazuo. "I'm the chairman of the Future Foundation, Kazuo Tengan. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"H-hello…" greeting Chiaki, bowing in respect. She tried not to sound sheepish and intimidated, but there was an unpleasant atmosphere in the room. It felt more like she was at a trial rather than a meeting. The focused gazes from everyone in the room made her feel vulnerable.

"I'm sure you already know, but everyone you see before you are division leaders. I think I speak for all of us when I say it's a relief to see you alive and well after what happened."

"Thank you." Chiaki was still timid, but she decided to speak on something she wanted to mention. "If I could, I'd like to thank Gozu for helping me. Without him, I don't think my physical therapy would've gone as well as it did."

"Ha, no problem!" huffed Gozu. "If you'd like, I could even teach you how to do a suplex."

"Uh…" The gamer was at a loss while she wondered if that was a skill she'd need.

"That won't be necessary," replied Chisa in a bubbly tone, approaching Chiaki and putting an arm around her. "We're all busy people, so if there are no questions that need answering, I say we start the vote."

The housekeeper looked at her in a funny way. It was like she was daring the gamer to say anything out of line. Chisa was, undeniably, having a fun time manipulating everyone. Chiaki wasn't going to mess around with her deranged former teacher, so she kept quiet.

"If no one here has anything to add, I don't see why—" began Kazuo before Usami's voice cut in.

"Actually, I have something to ask Yukizome."

"Oh?" replied Chisa, raising an eyebrow. "Let me guess—you'd like to know how I make my tea so well. I'd gladly share my technique with you, Gekkogahara."

"That's very considerate, but that isn't what's bothering me."

Chisa was acting in a carefree manner while Chiaki struggled to keep her rising fears from showing. If Miaya was about to do what she was thinking, things could get out of hand. Don't do it, Miaya…

"Ask away," replied Chisa. "I'd be glad to answer any question you have."

"I was looking over your report on the events that led to Chiaki being hospitalized, and I noticed something. If it's true Chiaki went missing on the day you said, then the gap between the disappearance and the finding of her body should be impossible considering the injuries she
suffered."

Chisa kept up her friendly smile while all the attention was on Miaya. Judging by the expressions in the room, the therapist's question raised interest.

Kyosuke was the next to speak up. "What are you suggesting, Gekkogahara?"

"This problem has a common factor—the time frame Yukizome has given. I have a strong reason to believe she was dishonest about the day of Chiaki's disappearance. Considering attendance wasn't largely enforced at Hope's Peak Academy for the Ultimates, it's possible for a student's absence to go under the radar for a long period of time."

Chiaki, who was biting her tongue to maintain composure, glanced at Chisa. As always, it was impossible to guess what she was thinking.

"In regards to that," began Seiko, "things were so crazy with the Despairs that I didn't really question it at the time, but the report did seem odd. I don't want to antagonize anyone, but recovering like that in such a short span of time is impossible."

"How much time would it take for something like that to be possible?" asked Gozu.

"I'd say a few months, at the least."

"That does sound more believable," commented Koichi. "Actually, that coincides with when the protests started to get heated up…"

"Are you all entertaining the idea that Yukizome was working with the Despairs!" exclaimed Kyosuke.

"No one is saying that," replied Usami. "I don't know why Yukizome would keep that hidden. She's been incredibly helpful to the rise of the Future Foundation, so I think it's only right to give her the benefit of the doubt. I wanted to give her this chance to explain herself, so it doesn't become an issue later on."

"I think you're being too soft," added Ruruka. "If Yukizome was trying to cover something up… who's to say her close friends weren't involved?"

"What the hell are you saying!" yelled Juzo, erupting out of his chair. "While you were out getting expelled for cheating, we were the ones busting our asses to find the truth!"

"Now, now, everyone," interrupted Daisaku, trying to restore order. "Let's all just take a deep breath and—"

" Shut up, damn it!" yelled a frustrated Ruruka. "You guys sure did a good job! Except for, you know—the crapload of dead people and global catastrophe!"

"It wasn't our fault! If anything, the girl is the one working with the Despairs!"

"Huh?" said Chiaki, taken aback by the accusation.

"That's absurd, Sakakura," added Usami. "I can personally assure you Chiaki is not in despair."

"It's also indisputable she was tortured," added Seiko. "If she was with the Despairs, why would that have happened?"

"Maybe her and the Despairs planned it so she could infiltrate the Future Foundation."
"She was injured to a major degree and fell into a coma," added Gozu. "Why would anybody go so far?"

"For the record, I don't think Nanami is in despair," said Koichi, adjusting his fedora. "Even so, we've witnessed the Despairs do horrendous things to themselves for the sake of it. I don't think it's unreasonable they would go that far if it meant accomplishing their goals."

"There's no way Nanami is in despair!" commented Ryouta, which was rare. "I didn't attend class much, but I only ever heard great things about her from everyone. She even went out of her way to help me one time. There's no way she could do those things if she was a Despair."

"That could've been an act," replied Juzo. The boxer tightly clenched his fists because he remembered his secretly kept confrontation with Junko. That embarrassing defeat proved to him that anybody could be a Despair. Similar to Kyosuke, he believed any flare of doubt should be smothered with merciless aggression. "There wasn't another incident like Nanami's, right, Kimura?"

"Yes…but—"

"Ain't that weird? What makes her special enough not to be killed? I'm starting to think the whole gamer shtick is a fake, and she's really a double agent for the Despairs or maybe even the Steering Committee."

"You're wrong!" exclaimed Chiaki, which caught everyone by surprise considering how soft-spoken she's been so far. It was ill-advised, but she couldn't contain that outburst. Questioning her talent was one thing, but insinuating she was using her friends and working with somebody like Junko was the worst thing you could say to her. "I'd never betray them… I'd never do that to myself…"

"I can vouch for her talent," added Koichi. "Without question, her title of Ultimate Gamer was well-deserved."

"Tch, that still doesn't—"

"Enough, Sakakura," interrupted Kazuo, listening carefully to the back and forth discussion. "This is all going in a circle. Yukizome, this all started with Gekkogahara's suspicion of you. What do you say?"

Everyone had gotten so heated, they hadn't paid attention to Chisa—who was silent the entire time. With the focus now back on her, a silence ensued since the housekeeper didn't speak right away. Then, everyone was taken by surprise when tears began falling down her face.

Is she crying? thought a confused Chiaki.

"It's true…" Chisa quietly murmured. "I lied about Chiaki's disappearance."

Gasps of surprise echoed from several individuals in the room. Even Miaya, who proposed the question, looked surprised by the sudden confession.

"Yukizome…" murmured Kyosuke, who looked to be at a loss—similar to Juzo.

"Can I ask why you would be untruthful about that information?" asked Kazuo, still composed.

Is she really going to say the truth…? wondered Chiaki. She knew whatever her former teacher was about to say could have a drastic effect on things going forward.
"You see," began Chisa, slamming her palms on the table and speaking in a sorrowful voice, "Chiaki had actually gone missing several months prior to the closing of the school! I didn't pay much attention at first because I was so busy with my investigation, but I soon realized she had vanished! So...while I tried my very hardest to find her—I kept the disappearance a secret. I didn't want my students and peers knowing I had messed up as a teacher again. I didn't want my two closest friends to know I was failing at my job while they were trying so hard..."

Juzo and Kyosuke exchanged looks while absorbing what Chisa was saying.

"I assume the next time you saw her is when you discovered her body?" asked Daisaku.

Chisa nodded while her sobbing continued. She proceeded to turn around, face Chiaki, and say, "I know you probably hate me, but I love all my students. When you needed me the most, I wasn't there. Give me another chance; I promise I'll never fail you again!"

She's unreal...thought Chiaki, truly realizing how well-versed Chisa's abilities were. Even in despair, her crying face and sincere sounding words were almost enough to fool her, who already knew the actual truth. It felt like she was indirectly apologizing for what happened. Could the real Ms. Yukizome still be alive?

The gamer was about to reply until Chisa made a discreet facial expression. Since her back was facing everyone else, Chiaki was the only one that could've seen it. A cocky smile crossed her wet face before she winked once.

...Of course, she isn't.

It's so hard not to laugh at this, thought Chisa, pinching her arm. I knew about that contradiction Gekkogahara mentioned. One of the most effective ways to lie is concealing the main deception behind a smaller one. With this, the real truth will remain hidden, and I will be clear of any suspicion. I'm starting to understand why Junko gets so bored of everything going her way.

"Is that the secret you were keeping, Chiaki?" asked Usami while Miaya stared directly into the gamer's eyes.

Once again, Chisa proved how cunning she was—and Chiaki would have to lie to Miaya. As always, while she hated it, the gamer already knew what she was going to do.

"It's true; that's what happened."

"Please don't hold it against her, Gekkogahara," added Chisa, wiping her face. "I asked her to keep quiet about it. It will be better now, right, Chiaki?"

"Yes, Ms. Yukizome."

"That's my little cinnamon roll!" Yukizome hugged Chiaki close to her in a joyous manner.

That explanation does sound reasonable, but...Miaya thought, still feeling a strange dissonance she couldn't explain.

"I suppose that settles things," said Seiko, being thankful the situation didn't escalate further.

"It still sounds a little suspicious to me," commented Ruruka, shoving a treat in Sonosuke's mouth.

"It's been settled, Ando," stated Kyosuke, focusing his gaze on Chiaki. "Yukizome thinks very highly of you—even calling you our savior. Just why do you want to be a division leader?"
Chiaki tried to think of the best way to explain. "I don't think I'm anything like a savior…but I want to help end all this so nobody has to suffer anymore."

"So, you claim to be on the side of hope?"

"No." Her response visibly intrigued Kyosuke along with several others. Even Chisa gave her a questioning glance. "A world of nothing but despair is bad, but I don't think the opposite of that is good either. Neither one has done anything for me…so I don't choose either one."

The gamer was expecting looks of disdain after her proclamation, but a few individuals present seemed amused. Both Koichi and Miaya smiled, and Chisa looked like she found it funny.

"You choose neither…?" said Kyosuke, tightening his gaze. "So, in other words, you're directionless. You just accept whatever circumstances come your way."

"I've always been like this."

"You think masquerading with such a resolve will end well?"

"All I know how to be is myself, and—" She firmly looked at the former Ultimate Student Council President. "—it's gotten me this far."

Kyosuke looked like he had another response ready before Chisa cut in. "I know she hasn't had the smoothest road, but Chiaki has done everything you’ve asked of her so far. She's worked hard to get healthy enough, and she isn't in despair. Don't take it personally, Chiaki. I doubt you could impress him if you grew wings and began shooting lasers out of your eyes."

The gamer glanced at the ceiling while being conflicted. Does she mean he's hard to impress…or that I'm just that unimpressive?

"Can we just start the vote already?" moaned Ruruka. "I have a million things to do later on."

*She'll just take a nap,* thought Juzo.

*Definitely a nap…* Seiko thought, knowing her former friend too well.

"One more thing," said Kyosuke. "The vote will commence under the condition that both Yukizome and Mitarai are exempt. I feel their history with the candidate will compromise their ability to critique."

"That's not fair!" stated Ryouta.

*I figured he'd try something like this,* thought a slightly annoyed Chisa. "We accept the conditions."

"B-but…Ms. Yukizome…"

"Be confident, Mitarai."

The animator looked down before nodding in acceptance and said, "I accept."

"As the rules state, we'll start with the latter division number," stated Kazuo. "You may start, Gozu."

"I must admit when I first saw Nanami’s files, I was unimpressed. Being a leader of the central organization against despair is taxing. Even so, upon meeting and working with her, I've seen the spirit she has. It reminded me that someone small like her can be just as courageous as myself. I
"I haven't really gotten to know her," began Daisaku in his light voice, "but, like Gozu said, big things can come from unexpected packages."

"Heh, does his voice surprise you, Chiaki?" asked Chisa.

"I didn't notice anything."

Her statement clearly made Daisaku happy as his eyes gleamed with joy and he exclaimed, "My vote is a yes!"

"Ugh," grunted Kyosuke rubbing his forehead, feeling a headache forming.

It was supposed to be Sonosuke's turn, but Ruruka spoke up instead. "This is stupid. Some video game otaku won't last a day in the Future Foundation. It's a no for both of us, right, babe?"

"Hmm?" hummed Sonosuke, not caring about the current situation. "Sure."

"Obviously, I've spent a lot of time getting to know her," said Usami. "I can't say I'm entirely on board with her being made to take on such a responsibility shortly after a traumatic event. Still, I believe she wants to help, and it would be insulting if I didn't respect her choice. The Future Foundation could benefit from a perspective like hers. I vote yes."

"I'm still not sold," stated Juzo, crossing his arms. "Despair needs to be crushed entirely. This is all just a waste of time. My vote is a no."

"I haven't seen many young people suffer what she's suffered and still end up wanting to try their best," commented Seiko. "I don't think she's the savior, though."

Chisa whispered something in Chiaki's ear that she wanted her to repeat. The gamer was skeptical, but said, "Your medicines were incredibly helpful and great, Kimura."

Seiko instantly grinned from ear to ear behind her mask while a blush enveloped her cheeks. "It's nothing really. My vote is a yes, by the way."

She never changes, thought Ruruka, disapproving.

"I, for one, am interested," stated Koichi. "The aura she has reminds me of a certain friend of mine's daughter. If the little lady is up for it, I say why not? I vote yes."

"Despite what you say, Yukizome," began Kyosuke, "the Future Foundation isn't some kind of social club. We all are humanity's best defense against despair. Thinking someone like Chiaki Nanami can be the savior is laughable at best. I vote no."

Finally, it was the chairman's turn. The vote was in Chiaki's favor by a score of five to four. Normally, the worst that could happen now would be a tie. The rule of the chairman's vote, however, counting as two wasn't forgotten by anybody. Whether she was accepted or denied—it rested on Chairman Tengan's shoulders.

The gamer was practically holding her breath in anticipation. She peeked at Ms. Yukizome to see her same confident smile as if failure wasn't a possibility.

"The decision will come down to me after all," Kazuo announced, using his intertwined fingers as a rest for his head. He closed his eyes for what seemed like a minute before he resumed. "I seem to
be at an impasse. On one hand, Munakata's statements make sense; however, there's still a part of me that understands Yukizome's argument. I don't doubt that if I were to follow my usual ideology, my vote would most likely be a no."

"I assume that's your answer?" questioned Kyosuke.

"...Not necessarily. Yukizome said something the day she nominated Nanami that I've thought about ever since. As time goes by, I'm starting to think my old methodology might not be the most efficient. It's for those reasons, I'm having trouble deciding." The old man went silent again for a moment. "May I ask you a question, Nanami?"

"Um...of course."

"You said earlier that a full elimination of despair or hope was incorrect—elaborate a bit more."

The gamer wondered how she should put it. "Maybe it's better for despair and hope to balance out. I think what the Despairs are doing needs to be stopped, but everyone carries despair just like everyone carries hope. You should just accept both—and walk towards the future. At least...that's what Miaya helped me realize."

"What would you do if you met the individuals responsible? Would you forgive them despite how you and the world have suffered, and help them see your viewpoint?"

"I..."

Just like that, the answer she thought so long about evaporated. While she did believe what she was saying, applying it to that situation was too hard. If she were ever to meet Junko again, the gamer wouldn't know how she'd react. She had no clue what her feelings would be in that moment.

"A predictable response," commented Kyosuke. "You claim that eliminating all despair is bad, but when faced with a situation where your beliefs are put to the test...you have no answer. It's glaring evidence of how indecisive you really are—almost like you have no side to stand on."

"What's wrong with that?" stated Kazuo, catching everyone by surprise. "As I've said, I'm not entirely sure what the best method is, and I'm an old man who has seen just about everything. How do we know she won't find her answer, given time? What kind of organization would this be if we ostracized someone that decided to face the future with nothing dictating her?"

"Really...?" asked Chiaki.

"I think that would be a grievous crime. I still have some doubts...but my vote is a yes."

"Hooray!" cheered Chisa, grabbing Chiaki's hands and jumping up and down. "You're in!"

Chiaki narrowed her eyes, wondering how becoming something against her will that would put her against a bunch of psychotic people was worth cheering over.

"Is there anything you'd like to add, Munakata?"

"...No," he muttered in a low tone.

"Then," began the chairman, sweeping his gaze over the room to see if anyone wanted to reply, "as the rules of a majority vote say: Chiaki Nanami is hereby instated as head of the Thirteenth Division. May this further lead us on our path to a brighter future."
The gamer was sitting alone in a lounge while playing her console. After the vote was decided in her favor, an employee escorted her to a luxurious lounge while the division leaders finished their meeting. The seats were comfortably padded and there was a nice aroma in the cool room.

She heard someone approaching the room. Chiaki quickly put away the game and sat up straight to look professional. The gamer was greeted by the smiling face of Ruruka with Sonosuke closely following behind.

"Hello, new partner!" cheered Ruruka, approaching before forcibly shaking her hand. "It's nice to have you on board!"

Chiaki didn't hold any kind of grudge against Ruruka, but she was still overwhelmed by the change in attitude as she asked, "I thought you didn't want me to be one of the division leaders?"

"No way! I was just looking out for you. You might not know this, but Sonosuke and I were a part of the seventy-sixth class."

Chiaki thought about if she ever saw Ruruka on campus. She would go for walks—though, most of it was her staring at a game screen. "I don't think I ever saw you."

"There was a little incident between me and a…former friend." The gamer tilted her head while Ruruka had a far-off look for a moment before her smile returned. "Since I haven't introduced myself yet, I'm the head of the Eight Division and former Ultimate Confectioner, Ruruka Ando. This handsome guy behind me is Sonosuke Izayoi, head of the Ninth Division and former Ultimate Blacksmith."

"A blacksmith?" repeated Chiaki, walking past Ruruka and staring at Sonosuke in awe. "Does that mean you make weapons like the type you see in games?"

"If I wanted."

"Amazing…"

Ruruka was a little annoyed, pouting in jealousy. "My talent is also pretty amazing, you know?" The confectioner walked to a small table that was oddly separated from the larger table full of snacks. "Garbage like snack food isn't fit to be beside my amazing creations." She grabbed a macaroon out of a plastic casing and handed it to Chiaki. "Everyone in the Future Foundation knows my sweets are to die for."

The gamer took the treat and ate half of it in one bite. Her cheeks warmed up so much, she had to clench her palms. An overwhelming flavor erupted, and her taste buds couldn't get enough. The sweets Noriko would give her wasn't this amazing. She even doubted Teruteru could make sweets at this level.

"What do you think?" Ruruka smiled, Chiaki's expression confirming what she knew all along, which was her creations were second to none. However, she wasn't prepared for one of the gamer's notorious critiques.

"It's alright," she replied, shoving the rest in her mouth.

"Say what!" yelled Ruruka, pushing her face so close to Chiaki's, their noses were touching. "Did
you seriously just say that! My creations are the best on the entire planet! Even God—"

Ruruka paused when she realized what was happening. The intention was to make a good impression, but her temper had gotten the better of her. Sonosuke looked at her with a raised eyebrow while Chiaki simply stared back.

"Uh…” Ruruka quickly backed up and cleared her throat. "I can get a little carried away when it comes to my talent. You understand, right?"

"I get the same way with my talent sometimes."

"Awesome! Now, I have a deal for you. To ensure a future of camaraderie, I'll get my boyfriend to make a special weapon, just for you. In return—you have to owe me."

"I don't know…” Chiaki wasn't sure how wise it would be to make deals behind Chisa's back. It could be bad for her and Ruruka.

"It'll be fine. You can bet the weapon you'll get will be amazing."

"Hmm," hummed the blacksmith, staring at Chiaki, "is there a tool you like to use?"

"A tool?" The gamer didn't really know how to answer that question. If he meant an object she normally used, then only one thing came to mind. "This, I guess." She pulled out her Game Girl and showed it to him.

Sonosuke silently observed the console. "I think I know something that will fit you." He pulled out some measuring tape while Ruruka skipped behind the gamer and held her arms up.

"He'll take a few measurements so the weapon will be comfortable for you to use."

"Okay, but—"

"Done," he announced, collecting his data staggeringly fast. "I'll deliver it when it's done."

"Look forward to it. Remember—you owe me now. I trust that our savior keeps her promises." Ruruka winked before she and the blacksmith departed.

"—I never agreed…” finished the gamer, unsure what to expect from the two lovers.

"Were you really trying to protect her?" asked Sonosuke.

"Hell no. It's favorable to have pieces in place for when I leave this stupid place." Ruruka smiled before yawning. "Let's hurry and get back. I could use a nap…"

VVV

Chiaki was quiet while she sauntered behind Kyosuke through an abandoned hallway.

The gamer was supposed to be briefed on the world's current situation. Chisa volunteered Kyosuke to handle this because she figured it would be a good chance to bond. Although, it looked like she was having fun at Kyosuke's expense when she saw how irritated it made him. The former Ultimate Student Council President was now leading her somewhere.

Should I say something? She would, occasionally, pry her eyes from the ground to peak at the uncommunicative man. His back faced her while they moved forward as if he had no intention of acknowledging her unless he absolutely had to. She didn't even want to pull out her game for fear
of making him more standoffish. Finally, she said, "It's really empty on this floor."

"Only agents with a high level of authorization can enter this floor. If anyone was caught trespassing, there would be repercussions." His answer was blunt, and he never turned his head.

"I've heard about places like that in stealth games."

"Did your entire education come from nothing but video games?"

"I've learned a lot from them. I think you'd be surprised to see the main character of one of my favorite games because he sort of looks like you. He uses a sword, wears glasses sometimes, and has an obsession with the truth—"

"I have no interest in a fictional character from a game."

With that, the silence resumed once more. It was clear Kyosuke didn't want to have any unnecessary conversations with the gamer, so she returned her gaze back to the ground.

After a few minutes of this, Chiaki stopped when she saw Kyosuke face an impressive set of doors. He then typed something on a control panel before putting his finger on a scanner.

"Identity confirmed," voiced the machine. "Welcome, Vice Chairman Kyosuke Munakata."

The man in the white suit didn't waste a beat as he walked through the doors with the gamer following behind. Even though the room was pitch-black, Chiaki could tell it was huge because of the echo their footsteps made. Kyosuke approached yet another control panel and started inputting commands.

"If you're going to fight against despair, it would be preferential to see what you're up against."

"What's going to happen?"

"Look for yourself."

After Kyosuke pushed one last button, the entire room was enveloped in a bright, luminescent light. Chiaki covered her eyes from the stinging flash. Upon looking, she saw the entire landscape of the room had changed.

*Where is this...?*

A long empty street with toppled cars and garbage scattered around was in front of her. Rows of tall crumbling buildings towered over the street under a dark, murky sky. It was truly like she had jumped into a post-apocalyptic movie.

"Using the advanced technology the Future Foundation has at its disposal, this simulation room was created for training purposes. For you, it will be a perfect sample of what you've chosen to fight against."

The gamer was so fascinated, she couldn't even blink. Despite the hellish landscape, she knew full well what was in front of her. "It's almost like a virtual reality..."

He raised an eyebrow at the girl's fascination. Most new agents become nervous when faced with this for the first time, but Chiaki seemed more transfixed than anything. "Why don't you take a look around?"

Kyosuke phrased it like a question, but it was clear he was telling her to explore the area. She
walked around a bit while sweeping her eyes over anything that seemed interesting. It was barren, and there didn't seem to be anything, in particular, to look at.

Finally, she noticed a strange object lying on the ground. It looked to be a mask of an ominous looking black and white bear. It seemed like an alternative version of Usami.

*Wait...* The gamer felt a strange ringing in her head upon staring at the mask. *Haven't I seen this before?* She tried to recall if she ever had, but nothing came to her. For some reason, looking at the mask gave her a familiar feeling of dread.

"Wah!" cried out what sounded like a little girl weeping.

Chiaki scrambled to find where it was coming from until she spotted a young girl in a pink dress crying in the middle of a street. Chiaki bent down to the girl's level before she asked, "What's wrong?"

"M-my mommy and daddy died!" The girl was wiping her wet face, despite tears still falling.

"I'm sorry..." She didn't know how to respond to something like that. "I lost people close to me too."

"B-but, there's something you should know..."

"What should I—" Before the gamer finished, the girl developed a sadistic grin and pulled a knife out before pointing it at her. Chiaki was so surprised, she fell to the ground. The sight of the knife made her heartbeat go erratic.

"I'm the one that killed them! They wouldn't give me what I wanted, so I cut their throats while they were sleeping!" The girl menacingly stalked towards Chiaki with an almost inhuman look in her eyes. "Actually, I think I might do the same to you!"

Chiaki shielded her eyes, not wanting to look anymore. After a couple seconds, she saw the girl had disappeared.

"This is what those in despair are like," said Kyosuke, appearing beside Chiaki. Next, a whole group of human holograms appeared around them in a circle. Their ages ranged from kids to the elderly and consisted of multiple ethnicities. "It matters little what form they come in."

"...Even children?"

"Certainly. We've had multiple counts of children half your age committing reprehensible acts."

The gamer thought about how her friends were turned into Despairs. From what she knew from her encounter with Junko and Chisa's accounts, a brainwashing technique was used. However, that didn't explain how despair could spread globally at the rate it was. "How did despair spread?"

"We know the protest by the Reserve Course is an important factor. In the technological age we live in, the Parade became a popular topic internationally. Suddenly, it became a domino effect as other groups feeling repressed started to do the same. Regular individuals stood up against their superiors for some superficial sense of equality the fools believed was attainable. It all should've stopped there—but it didn't."

Chiaki received a brief summary from Chisa and Miaya about the following events because she was in a coma at the time. She had yet to have an in-depth explanation like the one Kyosuke was giving. "What happened?"
"Just like the origins, we have yet to figure out why things escalated the way they did. The consensus is the Steering Committee might've had multiple partnerships with other organizations globally. Although, there hasn't been any substantial evidence proving that theory."

*Could Junko have done something about that too?* she thought. The only other person Chisa mentioned was Mukuro. There was her now despair driven former classmates, but that still didn't seem like the answer.

"What started as mere protests turned into violent riots, and then evolved into a full rebellion. It became a war between the talented and the talentless; the privileged and the less fortunate. Law and order were forsaken for pure malevolence against the higher powers."

"The Tragedy," concluded Chiaki.

"Before we knew what was on the horizon, it was already too late to stop it. The Tragedy, as it's now known, was in full swing. The Despairs gave up their reason—deciding to forcibly make the world into their ideal image. However, that wasn't the only problem. If it was only people who had given into insanity, defeating them wouldn't be giving us this much trouble."

"What else is there besides the Despairs?"

"Criminals, anarchists, drug cartels, militia, corrupt politicians, cyber terrorism, and the mafia are some examples. All of the groups I mentioned have taken complete advantage of the chaos to further their own endeavors. Just about every criminal organization you can think of has benefited greatly from the Tragedy. In a way, they are also a part of the Despairs—only making matters more troublesome. Add all these variables—you get a global phenomenon that worsens by the day."

If it wasn't clear before, she understood how bad it was now. Society was in terrible shape, and it looked to be getting worse. Now, more than ever, she felt ashamed of herself for not being able to stop Junko.

"Starting to realize this isn't a game?"

"I never thought it was a game."

"I find that hard to believe, with you claiming to be the savior and all."

"Ms. Yukizome is the one who says that… I've never saved anybody." There was an extended silence as the holograms disappeared, and the room turned back to normal. It was now just a wide room with lights blaring overhead. "…Will I have to kill people?"

"For some targets, an elimination order may be issued. Although, thanks to Chairman Tengan's new policies, there is much less of that now. Someone like you would rarely get called into the field unless we were short-handed. Paperwork is what you'll be doing for the most part."

"Oh."

Kyosuke sighed at how different the gamer was. He was sure of his convictions, and Chiaki gave the impression she was just idly flowing by life without a true goal. "I meant what I said during the vote; there will come a day where you'll be tested, and when it does—that weak ideology of yours will crumble."

"Don't be so cruel, Munakata," announced the cheery voice of Usami. The gamer smiled when the former Ultimate Therapist rolled in. "Not everyone can be as secure and stalwart as you. Just give
"You're too soft, Gekkogahara," replied Kyosuke, walking towards the door. "I've done my job, so I'll take my leave. Try not to get yourself killed, Chiaki Nanami." He exited, leaving the two alone.

"How did it go?" asked Usami.

"I think he hates me," the gamer nonchalantly replied.

"Hehe, that's just Munakata. Despite how he comes off, he really is trying his best to protect everyone. He's helped and saved so many lives since this all started. It's just that he can be a bit… callous when it comes to understanding others."

"I understand." Chiaki realized Miaya probably needed something. "Did you need help, Miaya?"

"I just came to say goodbye. You're no longer my patient, but now you're a promising new division leader. The recovery you made was truly remarkable."

The gamer smiled while looking away. "I still don't think I'll ever really be happy again."

"That's something which requires time. If you work as hard as you've done so far, you'll be fine. You certainly don't need me anymore."

"But…" Chiaki looked sad because of her parting with the therapist. Talking to Miaya felt like a normal routine since waking up from her coma. She didn't want to think about where she'd be if Miaya wasn't there to help her. The shy therapist was one of the few people she trusted.

"It's not like we'll never see each other again—we're co-workers now, silly! Maybe our divisions will have a joint operation one day."

"Maybe." A switch clicked as the gamer remembered she had a question for the therapist. "I wanted to ask you something. Well…actually, I guess it's two things. Why do you use a wheelchair, and why did you make your avatar look like that bear the Despairs use?"

"In regards to the wheelchair, I was born with a relatively weak body. I'd get sick often, and I could never be too physically active. Eventually, it was decided that traveling by wheelchair would be more convenient for my health. As for Usami, I wanted her to be a foil for the bear the Despairs seem to have embraced. After a while of brainstorming, I decided to create Magical Girl Miracle Usami!"

"Are you still weak?"

"My body has improved, but it's still for the best I use a wheelchair. Besides, it's also a nice way to get work done on the move. Believe me, the Future Foundation will keep you so busy, you'll look for any shortcut you can get." While the gamer dreaded the thought of busy work, Miaya had a question of her own. "Before I go, Chiaki…do you have anything else you want to tell me?"

Chiaki exchanged looks with the therapist for a moment. "I do." She took a deep breath before bowing in respect. "Thank you, Miaya."

The therapist narrowed her eyes before smiling. "It was a pleasure!"

She proceeded to stick out her hand for a final handshake. Instead of shaking it, Chiaki approached the therapist and hugged her. This was her way of expressing her gratefulness as well as her sadness for not being honest.
"T-this is sweet of you, dear, but…"

Chiaki looked to see Miaya had an embarrassed glow, which made her retreat as she said, "I forgot, sorry."

"It's alright. Before I help others, I guess I really should work on fixing my own problems, huh? Regardless…good luck, Chiaki."

The therapist rolled away but came to a stop when she noticed somebody at the door. Chisa was smiling while leaning against the wall.

"I had no personal vendetta against you, Yukizome. I just wanted to give you a chance to clear the air."

"Think nothing of it. If I was in your position, I would've done the same. It's nice how much of an initiative you take with your patients."

"I'm happy you didn't take it personally. Good luck, Yukizome…and please take care of her."

"I would hate myself forever if I did anything less than that."

Miaya smiled one last time in Chiaki's direction before finally departing.

"Are you ready?"

Chiaki looked down before staring at her former teacher. "Yes…probably…"

"Then, let us be off."
"I'm open!" yelled Akane, quickly spotting up behind the three-point line. Ibuki proceeded to pass the basketball with pinpoint accuracy into the Ultimate Gymnast's hands. Mikan was in front of her attempting to play defense, which amounted to the nurse waving her arms around in a helpless manner. Akane easily shot the ball before perfectly hitting the three-point attempt.

"Alright!" yelled Ibuki, high-fiving Akane. "Ibuki and friends are now up two points!"

"Dammit, Tsumiki!" yelled a frustrated Kazuichi. "What kind of defense was that!"

"I'm sorry!" she replied, covering her eyes in shame.

"Hey!" interrupted Mahiru. "Don't yell at her, Soda! I didn't see you doing any better!"

"Now we're down two points with only ten seconds left…" mentioned Chiaki, knowing the situation.

"What a bunch of hot heads," scoffed Hiyoko, drinking some lemonade on the sidelines. "Getting all worked up and sweaty over a dumb game."

"They certainly are giving it their all," smiled Chisa. "It makes me wish I asked to participate."

Currently, the seventy-seventh class was spending a warm afternoon playing a game of basketball in the gym of Hope's Peak Academy. They put on some spare uniforms before forming their respective teams. The team of Kazuichi, Mikan, Chiaki, and Mahiru were playing against Akane, Ibuki, Gundham, and Sonia. They all agreed the loser would be stuck on cleaning duty for a month.

"What's the matter, half-pint?" coldly asked Hiyoko, looking at Fuyuhiko leaning against the bleachers. Ever since Hiyoko's incredible growth spurt, she had become even more impolite than usual. "Is the basket too high for you?"

"Big talk coming from someone who still needs help getting dressed," he countered, not staring in her direction.

The comment made a vein pop out of the dancer's head while she said, "Humph, well I bet you couldn't even lift the ball high enough to shoot it because you're so scrawny and unimpressive."

"You better watch how you talk to me, bitch." Fuyuhiko glared at Hiyoko, making her flinch a bit. "I can make it so you spend the rest of your life doing that dancing crap in a brothel—young blondes like yourself go for a lot."

"That's enough," firmly interrupted Chisa. "You know you wouldn't do that, Kuzuryu. Behave, Saionji." Both parties looked away from each other before Chisa glanced at the fake Ryouta. "You didn't want to participate, Mitarai?"

"I'm not really interested in this game," he replied, drawing an animated character on a tablet with admirable precision. "I'm better off monitoring the group and making sure things don't get out of hand."

"As responsible as always," she replied, laughing under her breath. "I assume you playing would be too big of a mismatch, Nidai?"
"That, and I promised to do it to whoever wins."

Chisa raised an eyebrow, not knowing exactly what that meant. She began getting worked up at the thought of her students possibly being up to unmentionable things. "Um…what did you mean by that?"

"I can give you a sample."

"I don't think—" Before the housekeeper could object, Nekomaru had already started massaging her shoulders. Any resistance she had faded because instant pleasure erupted from her joints. "Oh, my…"

"What were those weak moves!" shouted Sonia, doing her best to emulate the trash talking she thought was supposed to happen during sports. "You all need to step your game up!"

"Ooh, burn!" commented Ibuki. "You've been doing super, Tanaka. You have more points than any of us!"

"Why, of course. No opponent can hope to claim victory upon me tapping into the power of my right arm. The mere fact our score isn't bigger is mercy on my part."

"I don't know about all that," began Akane, excited to have her prize in the form of Nekomaru massaging her close, "but I'll be damned if I'm losing! I'm going at it with full power!"

"With the amount of time left, we'll only have time for one more shot," concluded Kazuichi. "Since a date with Miss Sonia is on the line here, we have to win. I'm the best player here, so I'll take the shot to tie the game and we'll win in overtime."

"Hold up," interrupted Mahiru, trying to catch her breath along with everyone else. "Two things: I don't remember Sonia ever promising you a date, and who said you're the best player?"

"I'm the only one here who's played before, and I watch pro basketball all the time," he replied, conveniently ignoring Mahiru's first statement. "Think you could make the shot?"

"Well…no. But, Tsumiki could—" Both Mahiru and Kazuichi stared at Mikan, who had her jersey on backward, and fatigue was about to make her pass out. "Fine. You win."

"No," cut in Chiaki with her eyes closed and her arms crossed. "We're going for the win." She opened her eyes to reveal a gaze of determination. "I'll take the shot."

"Huh?" Mahiru, Mikan, and Kazuichi all simultaneously said.

"Are you sure…?" asked Mahiru. "It's not that I don't think you could do it, but you haven't scored a single point so far."

"A-aren't you nervous you'll miss?" asked Mikan.

"I've succeeded over a hundred times in the past."

Why both Mahiru and Mikan were shocked the Ultimate Gamer had such confidence, Kazuichi silently walked up to her before they both stared each other intently in the eyes. In a rigid tone, Kazuichi asked, "Can I trust you?"

"You can."

"Cleaning duty for a month."
"It won't happen to us."

"I need you to take us to the promised land."

"I'd carry you all on my back, even if my legs were cut off."

After a few more seconds of intense staring, Kazuichi stuck out his hand. "Take us there."

Chiaki proceeded to firmly shake his hand. "I will."

"Geez," scoffed Hiyoko. "It's not like you're going to war or something…"

"It appears they're starting again," announced Peko, quietly sitting. She seemed oddly interested in the game.

Both teams took their positions, and Mahiru was set to inbound the ball. Sonia was going to guard her, Ibuki guarded Mikan, Gundham guarded Kazuichi, and Akane guarded Chiaki. The gamer waited patiently, already seeing the ending she wanted.

*Koizumi will inbound the ball to Tsumiki,* she thought. *Then Tsumiki will pass it back to Koizumi.*

Mahiru passed the ball to Mikan, and she passed it back to Mahiru. Then the photographer dribbled the ball towards Kazuichi.

*Seven seconds left. Now, both Owari and Tanaka will react when Soda gets the ball because they'll naturally assume he wants to take the final shot—that'll give me the opportunity I need!*

Mahiru passed it to Kazuichi, making both Akane and Gundham react, just like the gamer foresaw.

"He's taking the shot!" yelled Akane, helping Gundham on defense as Kazuichi drove towards the basket.

"Gotcha," smiled Kazuichi, showing his jagged teeth before passing it back to Chiaki, who was wide open.

"Nanami's taking the shot!" yelled Ibuki before Akane used every bit of her speed to make it back to Chiaki. The gamer was standing at the top of the three-point line.

*Three seconds. I need to fake Owari out!* Chiaki pretended to shoot the ball, which made Akane fly past her while attempting to block.

"Damn! She got me!"

"Finally, I take the three-point shot for the win!" Chiaki jumped in the air before releasing her shot.

"What a beautiful jumper!" admired Sonia.

At this point, the entire class had their eyes glued to the game.

"She's gonna do it!" praised Mahiru.

With sweat pouring down her forehead, Chiaki gracefully landed while her shot hung in the air. Everyone watched while the ball entered the apex of its trajectory.

"Wait a second…” muttered Kazuichi, who was the first to notice.
"Huh?" Chiaki observed her shot and saw it was far right of the basket. Actually, it was on target for something else.

"I've bought a new batch of lemonade for the lovely ladies—" announced Teruteru before the ball hit him square in the face. His lights went out immediately, causing lemonade and glass shards to scatter on the floor.

"Oh dear!" yelled Mikan, running to administer first aid.

"I'll get the broom…" sighed Chisa, upset her massage was over.

"We win!" yelled Sonia before the winning team celebrated their victory.

"I missed…" Chiaki wasn't sure what went wrong; she was positive she did everything perfectly.

"What the hell was that!" yelled a livid Kazuichi. "I thought you said you've done that a hundred times!"

"I don't know what happened. It worked almost every time… in the game."

"Ah," began Mahiru, finally understanding, "now it makes sense."

"Argh!" erupted the mechanic in frustration while he vigorously rubbed his bright hair. "Start with that next time!" Kazuichi continued to sulk, and the gamer held her head in shame.

Later that evening, Chiaki offered to clean up the broken glass since it was her fault. After putting the final shards in the garbage, she plopped down on the floor before drinking from a bottle of water.

"You finished already?" asked Mahiru, returning while wearing her normal school uniform. "I came all the way back to help you out."

"Ms. Yukizome had already gotten most of it, so it didn't take me long."

"I see." Mahiru sat down next to the gamer. "…Can I say something embarrassing?"

"Sure."

"It was pretty rough a few months ago… with Sato passing away. She always supported me in whatever I did. She even told me Hope's Peak was considering bringing her up to the main course for her archery skills. We had so much fun talking about how we'd finally be Ultimates together before she—" The photographer was getting a little choked up. "Sorry."

Chiaki assured her with a sympathetic smile. "It's alright."

"What I'm getting at is, despite what happened, these past few months have been some of the most fun I've ever had." Mahiru smiled at the gamer before composing herself.

Chiaki modestly grinned, hugging her knees. "I keep saying you all have done more than I have. I've just been making things up as I go along."

"Whatever it is you're doing—keep doing it." Before Chiaki could react, Mahiru snapped a picture of both of them with incredible speed. The redhead laughed when she saw her bright smile next to Chiaki's widened eyes and confused expression.

"Haha! That's a keeper."
"You could've warned me," she replied, wiping her eyes. "I'm not photogenic at all."

"I couldn't resist." Mahiru slipped her new photo into her pocket. "How come you haven't been hanging out with your friend lately?"

"My friend?"

"Sometimes, when I'd visit Sato, you'd be talking with some boy. I figured he was your friend since you always looked like you were having fun."

Chiaki felt an uncomfortable wave build up in her chest at the thought of Hajime. The last time she saw him was months ago. According to Chisa, nothing had happened, so she was starting to believe he might simply be avoiding her. She never caught a glimpse of him at the Reserve Course where she'd wait. "I don't think he was having fun…"

"Oh…" Mahiru could see the gloominess on the class rep's face clear of day. "Well, it's his loss. How about you and me hang out in my dorm later on? We could have a sleepover, and I'll even show you how to take better pictures."

"Sure," the gamer happily replied. "I have to take a shower and change first, though."

"See you there!" Mahiru ran off while a certain housekeeper entered the gymnasium after overhearing the conversation.

"Koizumi is such a sweet girl."

"Yeah."

"I really am proud of you all. If we knew where Komaeda was, it would be perfect. Knowing him, he'll probably turn up when we least expect it."

Chiaki agreed while a question bothered her. "Ms. Yukizome…are you sure nothing happened to Hinata?"

Chisa's smile quivered a bit before she said, "I'm completely sure. He's probably working hard to achieve his Ultimate title. It'll all work out!"

"You're right," replied Chiaki, feeling better after talking to her teacher, just like she always did. "I'm sure we'll see each other again."

"That's the spirit! Now, regarding that matter we discussed yesterday, have you made a decision yet?"

"…I'm not sure."

What Chisa was referring to is the letter she delivered to Chiaki earlier in the week. The letter was none other than an invitation to join the student council. Academically speaking, she was good enough to get in, but what really helped her was the flurry of recommendations Chisa had gathered for her.

"After seeing how well you did in my absence, I felt I had to make a push for you."

"Isn't everyone in the student council rich geniuses? I don't think I'd fit."

"You're underestimating how highly your peers think of you. There's more to being successful than having book smarts and a wealthy background. Plus, being part of the student council would look
beautiful on your record. I know all your interest is in gaming, but having options is important."

"Still…” The gamer looked at the ceiling while being consumed by indecision. She knew how
good it would be for her, but the decision wasn't so easy. "I just feel like it's not for me."

"You thought the same things about Hope's Peak Academy, and look how that's turned out. You've
changed from that melancholy girl who'd never talk to anyone."

Chisa stopped trying to convince her because she noticed her student's opinion wouldn't change. As
good as the opportunity was, it seemed like Chiaki wanted to stay being the seventy-seventh class's
representative and nothing else.

"Even if you don't think you'll do it, give it a few days. It really is a phenomenal accomplishment."

With those final words, the housekeeper left Chiaki to her thoughts in the empty gymnasium. She
spotted the basketball from earlier and decided to try one last shot before leaving. After getting
back to her earlier position behind the three-point line, she shot the ball and was surprised to see it
go through the hoop.

*Everything will be fine,* she thought, leaving the gym.

VVV

"Wake up, sleepy head," announced Chisa, rubbing the gamer's shoulder. "We should be arriving
in a few minutes."

"I wasn't asleep," she replied, sitting up while the helicopter's propellers were audibly loud. The
murky sky returned to being the backdrop, and a slight drizzle had just started.

"Thinking of the past?"

"I remembered the day we played basketball in the gym."

"You mean that time you gave Hanamura a concussion? Now that I think about it, you were
deciding whether to join the student council at that time. The way I campaigned for you back then
was similar to how I lobbied for you to be a division leader. I guess it was fortunate you didn't join,
with them killing each other and all. They were all such promising kids, and there was even a girl I
met with the cutest hoodie—such a shame they all died."

The gamer saw Chisa smile like she was recalling a nostalgic and happy memory.

"Although, you still ended up almost dying in a cruel way. In retrospect, maybe it didn't make that
much of a difference."

The housekeeper giggled and looked at the gamer as if she was expecting her to get the joke.
Chiaki looked out the window while another thought entered her mind. "You knew about Hinata
back then, didn't you?"

"You bet. I figured out what had happened to him a while ago up to that day."

"…Were you lying the whole time?" Chisa seemed to get amusement out of Chiaki's rare anger.

"The truth would've stung, and there wasn't anything that could be done to stop it at that point. It
hurt me to lie, and I never imagined it would escalate how it did. Think what you will, but I only
ever had your best interest at heart—I always have."
Chiaki gazed downwards while the image of Chisa pushing her into that elevator replayed in her head like it did so many times. *Liar...*

After a few minutes passed, Chiaki arrived at her new base of operations. It wasn't as impressive as the main headquarters, but it was still huge. The skyscraper had many waves of security, and there were agents everywhere.

"Where are we?"

"We're still in Japan; Tokyo wouldn't be too far away from here, actually. Let's go."

"To where?"

"Your room, of course."

The duo ventured into the lobby, after getting through all the security, and used the elevator. Apparently, a part of this facility was dedicated to housing. Chiaki tried to keep track of all the hallways they ventured through, but she gave up due to the immense size. If she divagated from Chisa, she didn't know if she'd ever find her way out. Chisa stopped at a random door at the end of a long, empty hallway.

"This floor is only for housing higher level employees, like yourself. See that there?" Chisa pointed to a scanner, similar to what Chiaki saw Kyosuke use. "Once your information is entered into the system, you'll be using that. For now, this will have to do." Chisa pulled out a card and swiped it. "You'll get one of these cards that will automatically let you into a variety of areas."

"This is my room...?" she said after the door opened to reveal a luxurious looking room that was more than big enough to accommodate one person. It had a fresh scent and looked incredibly tidy.

"Welcome to a room fit for a division leader," boasted Chisa. "I bet you're really thankful you have this job now."

Chiaki walked to the huge king-sized bed and plopped down face first on the soft blankets. "You said all of my stuff was here?"

"Right in here," replied Chisa, showing Chiaki the walk-in closet filled with lots of boxes. Chiaki opened a random one to see an object she hadn't held in what felt like years. "Isn't that your kitty hoodie?"

"...It supposed to be a bat."

"My mistake. I'd love to let you sort through all your things, but there's one more area I have to show you."

After carefully laying her hoodie on the bed, they departed the impressive room. Whatever the next destination is, was located in the much taller main building. They rode the elevator to the top floor and Chisa stopped in front of a pair of steel doors. She swiped her card, making the doors open.

"Welcome to your office, Thirteenth Division Leader," playfully stated Chisa.

It was a quaint office with bookshelves adorning the room and a flat-screen television ingrained on the wall. The back of the room had a large window, giving her an amazing view, with a large desk and leather chair positioned next to it. The gamer walked to the chair and took a seat. She felt like a stereotypical villain that would monolog their evil plans.
"You look ready for this already."

"This feels weird." Up until this point, Chiaki had never done anything like working for a major corporation—she felt out of place.

"It'll come naturally over time. Besides—" Chisa intertwined her fingers before facing her back towards the gamer. "—the real fun begins soon."

Chiaki gulped after the ominous forecast was spoken by the housekeeper. Before she could inquire further, Chisa picked up a box, that was laying on the floor, and dropped it on the desk with a loud thud.

"What's this…?" asked Chiaki, expecting a horde of vipers to spring from the box.

"Paperwork!" she zestfully replied, opening the brown box to reveal a huge stack of papers. "There are quite a few things you'll need to read and sign."

"Huh?"

"You have to read some regulations, status reports, records of the current personnel in your division —"

Chisa kept going on and on while dropping more stacks of paper on the desk. Chiaki looked on in horror while Chisa was doing the scariest thing she had seen so far. The amount of paperwork in front of her felt like it should be illegal.

"—finally, there are some minor documents you'll be expected to memorize. I want all this to be done by the end of the month."

"But how—"

"Have fun!" Chisa skipped out of the room.

Chiaki looked at all the work in front of her and sighed heavily. "I should've been a NEET…"
Save the Insanity Resonance

Chapter Notes

This is something I should've mentioned at the beginning, but the Junko whose character I've interpreted is her game incarnation. Her Danganronpa 3 version just felt...off to me. This is just a minor aesthetic point, and it really doesn't matter in the long run—just thought I should mention.

Chiaki heavily yawned before further fiddling with her new, sleek touchscreen phone. Chisa had given it to her since all Future Foundation agents were required to carry the specially made phones that were run on a heavily secure network. It was discouraging when she found out installing gaming apps wasn't possible, though.

"Nightmares keep you up again?" asked Chisa while her and Chiaki walked through the hallways. The housekeeper had woken her former student early, which the gamer didn't appreciate because she wasn't a morning person, to lead her to a special room. Chiaki guessed it had something to do with her transformation, as Chisa called it, but guessing the housekeeper's intentions was like trying to hit the lottery twice. She adjusted the folds on her blazer and gave up thinking about it.

"There's no shame in taking those pills Kimura prescribed to you."

"I know..." Despite her convalescence being successful, she would have occasional nightmares. Every time it would happen, she woke in a cold sweat. The pills always helped, but she didn't want to depend on them all her life.

"It's a shame the machine couldn't heal your mental state."

"You mean the machine that Hina—I mean, Kamakura put my body in?"

"The Izuru Kamakura Project was thought to be an impossibility because the human body wouldn't be able to survive the procedure. However, that billion dollar piece of technology was designed to repair any damage to the cellular level at an absurd rate. It's the prime reason you could recall what happened to you so quickly, in addition to your physical therapy going so efficiently."

"Did the surgery hurt Hinata?"

"Most certainly," she replied with a tone of schadenfreude like she always did when describing something horrific. "There's no doubt he suffered unimaginable agony in both mind and body."

Chiaki held a closed hand to her chest while she thought about how much Hajime suffered in the same machine her body was contained in.

"That boy truly is the ultimate example of trying to be something you're not."

Chiaki ignored the snide remark before she asked, "What happened to the Steering Committee?"

"Dead. It's likely Junko ordered her attack dog of a sister to kill them so she could make contact with Kamakura."
"Back in the simulation room, Munakata said the Steering Committee might've had ties with other organizations to help spread despair. Did Junko have something to do with that too?"

"Finally willing to learn more about your nemesis?" asked Chisa while the gamer refused to meet her smiling face. "Don't forget she was originally enrolled under the title of Ultimate Fashionista—a title well-deserved. Her beauty and enticing charisma earned her multiple accolades. I'm sure by the time she'd gotten to Hope's Peak, she had already been all over the world."

The gamer's eyes widened when she realized what Chisa was suggesting. "You're saying that while she was traveling the world, she was bringing people on her side…"

"As I'm sure Kyosuke told you, many organizations have benefited from the lawless environment the Tragedy has created. It's possible Junko's plan had been in development for years prior to her arriving at Hope's Peak. There are certain parties I've taken a personal interest in."

"Do you mean Ultimate Despair?"

"Ultimate Despair wasn't truly created until after the Tragedy. The people I'm referring to may have been helping Junko before that. While I believe she had many backers, I've been looking into two in particular. The first were two childhood friends she had."

"Someone else besides her sister?"

"One was a boy she was rather close with, but he's been killed. The other is…a female Reserve Course student."

That caught Chiaki's interest. This new knowledge Junko might've been close to someone without a talent was surprising.

"The official records show that none of the Reserve Course students lived. In truth, there were two that lived. The first was the girl I'm referring to and the second—you should know the answer."

"Hinata…"

The housekeeper nodded. "Mitarai was a crucial piece too. Do you believe he was truly being held against his will?"

"Yes," she quickly replied. Chiaki vividly remembered the fear she saw in Ryouta's eyes when she found him. Ever since her awakening, all he's tried to do is help and be supportive. "I think Junko finding Mitarai was just bad luck."

"I doubt that. While her analysis ability is amazing, Junko can't connect dots she doesn't know is there. It's likely she knew about Mitarai beforehand and figured his talent might aid her cause in some way. Mitarai's imprisonment was probably just a matter of time."

Chisa's explanation of Junko's supreme prudence only made the gamer more troubled. She was supposed to be a match for the despair mastermind, who could formulate articulate plans over the span of years, but she couldn't see how. The talent and acumen just seemed to form a gap as wide as the ocean. No matter how hard she looked, Chiaki couldn't see the other side.

"How can anybody stop someone like that…?"

"We wouldn't be in this predicament if there was a simple answer. Pairing such a ridiculous talent with an already ridiculous girl is a match made in hell. But—" Chisa stared at the gamer with an eerily warm smile. "—her downfall is when she gave you the avenue to live."
She still couldn't tell how serious the housekeeper was about her being the savior, or if it was some cruel joke she was trying to squeeze as much entertainment as possible out of.

"You keep saying that, and I don't understand. It's like you said: she is and can do incredible feats. Is being the opposite of that really a good thing…?"

"It's true that both of you have led different lives. While Junko was out emblazoned in wealth and fame, you were alone in your room playing video games. She was someone who earned the admiration of millions, and you didn't have a true friend until Hope's Peak Academy."

"…Is this encouragement?" asked Chiaki, getting more depressed by the word.

"Point is, while those parallels exist, you being her antithesis has an entirely different meaning."

"What does it mean?"

"It'd be pointless if I gave you all the answers—figure it out yourself. Think of it as a school project." The gamer sighed while Chisa enjoyed stringing her along like that. "There is another organization I'm worried about. Ever hear of the Towa Conglomerate?"

She quietly gasped when she recalled the name. "Don't they make futuristic technology and stuff? They're on Junko's side?"

"I don't know how she did it, but I feel she somehow coaxed Tokuichi Towa, the chairman of the Towa Conglomerate, into helping. This isn't confirmed since the Towa Group has helped us by making weapons, so that absolves them from doubt in the eyes of the Future Foundation. Still, I have sources saying they could be producing weapons for the Despairs."

"Like guns and stuff?"

"Robots."

"…What?" The gamer blinked in disbelief. She knew full well what robots were because she's seen them in games a thousand times. The notion of them actually being in Junko's arsenal was sobering. "So, you're saying that in addition to Despairs, criminals, and corrupt organizations…we might have to fight robots?"

"Yep."

Have I been trapped in a game…? she thought. "You're not going to tell the Future Foundation until it's convenient, are you?"

"Oh, you know me so well. You could betray me and do it yourself, but we both know how that will go. In any case—" Chisa put an arm around her former student. "—you love me way too much to do that!"

The gamer said nothing, deciding to focus on walking to wherever they were going.

Soon, the duo stepped into the elevator, which was always uncomfortable since being in an elevator— especially with Chisa present—made her uneasy for obvious reasons. The former teacher entered a code on the panel, revealing a new set of buttons that was hidden behind a metal compartment.

"Most Future Foundation bases have restricted floors that only those with a high level of clearance can freely enter. Normally, it's only for storage, interrogation rooms, and escape passages."
"Escape passages?"

"The security is so diligent that it's doubtful there would be any major problems. Still, in the instance of an ambush, it's important for the higher ranking employees to escape."

Chisa pushed a button, making them descend while the gamer was bothered by the previous statement. That kind of hierarchical thinking is what contributed to the disaster at Hope's Peak Academy. She knew precautions were necessary, but it still felt like hypocrisy. She was tempted to ask Chisa about it, but she held her tongue because the housekeeper would've probably just teased her about it.

After minutes of annoyingly catchy elevator music, they finally came to a halt. The doors opened to reveal a plain hallway illuminated by overhead lights.

"Currently, we're a few floors underground. Follow."

Doing as she was told, Chiaki followed behind while Chisa's white coat flowed back and forth. Her anxiousness increased when she thought of the possible things Chisa had planned for her. She assumed it would be some kind of training to improve her strength. However, if she had to be taken to a secure area like this, it must've meant Chisa was going to do something that wouldn't be okay for others to see.

While steeling her nerves, Chiaki asked, "Ms. Yukizome…what exactly are we going to do?"

"Getting cold feet?" Chisa glanced back with that eerie smile, which unsettled the gamer. "Don't tell me you want to quit?"

"It's just, what kind of transformation are you talking about? You're not going to make me kill someone…are you?"

"My goal isn't to turn you into something like Pekoyama or Ikusaba. Someone like you is about as threatening as a flailing kitten."

Chiaki couldn't help but puff out her cheeks at the embarrassing, yet fitting comparison.

"You need other methods to be efficient. For example, watch this."

Chisa took off her shoes and walked forward. The gamer didn't know what she was doing, at first, but she understood after a few seconds. The housekeeper was making absolutely no noise while she walked, like a whisper in the wind.

"Cool, right?" Chisa boasted before putting her shoes back on. "Try to walk heel to toe, keep your body compact, and put as little weight on your feet as possible. If you get good enough, doing it with shoes on will seem easy."

"Where did you learn that?"

"Heh, your beloved teacher has seen a thing or two. There's more to strength than just physical ability. Some of the most dangerous people in the world aren't physical specimens, but their technique and prowess are on a whole different level. We can work on those things some other time. Remember what I said that day we talked during your physical therapy?"

Chiaki recalled the conversation instantly since every meeting with Chisa was hard to forget. "You said you'd give me an immunity to despair, I think."
"Bingo." Chisa stopped in front of a door before opening it. "We've arrived."

The gamer slowly approached the door as the whole situation felt painfully familiar. Here her former teacher was, smiling and leading her down a barren hallway. She doubted Junko would be waiting for her this time, but that still didn't ease her nerves. Even so, there was no turning back—so she walked into the dim room. It was mostly dark and empty with the exception of a chair and a few screens mounted on the wall.

"I'm gonna need you to take a seat in that chair, sweetheart," politely asked Chisa.

Upon walking to the chair, Chiaki's heart almost drilled out of her chest when she saw the metal restraints on the arms of the chair—it looked like something used for torture. She jumped when Chisa put a hand on her shoulder.

"Now," she bluntly said.

While her heartbeat became more erratic, she did as told and sat down. Her skin crawled when the cold metal wrapped around her wrists.

"This won't hurt you at all. Well…not physically."

Chiaki couldn't help but focus on that last off-handed comment. That statement could've meant many things.

"Let me explain what we're going to be doing." Chisa pulled several USB flash drives from her pockets. "I'm sure you remember what Junko used to brainwash our class?"

She didn't know where this was going but answered, "The despair video."

"While Junko did individually convert them to Ultimate Despair, that brainwashing technique was an important catalyst. What if I told you there was a way to counter it?"

Despite the growing feeling of terror, the gamer was interested to see what Chisa had in mind.

"The brain is one of the most interesting things on Earth. How your brain reacts to subliminal messaging, like unconscious bias, can be trained so you can gain dominance over them. After all, human beings are creatures of habit." Chisa grabbed a pair of studio headphones that were plugged into one of the monitors and placed them over Chiaki's ears. "Look straight at the screens."

The gamer saw Chisa stick one of the flash drives in a port. Then weird indescribable images began playing on the screen and a bizarre noise, unlike anything she had ever heard, played in her ears. She felt a strange sensation in her skull that was giving her a headache. She was utterly confused at what the point of any of this was.

Thirty seconds passed before Chisa stopped the video and removed the headphones before she asked, "How was it?"

"...It gave me a headache. What was that?"

"That was a severely watered down version of Junko's brainwashing video."

Chiaki gasped in shock. Finding out that she just watched the thing that aiding in making her friends insane felt surreal. The gamer wanted to get up until the metal restraints reminded her she wasn't going anywhere. "I thought you weren't going to turn me into Ultimate Despair!"
"Hear me out," replied Chisa, waving her hand. "I need to make you immune to the brainwashing. The only way that's possible to do without turning you into a maniac is continuous exposure. I took out all of the actual images of genocide since the goal isn't to make you numb to death. Let's try a different one this time."

Before she could attempt to object, Chisa put the headphones back over her ears and inserted another flash drive.

The gamer felt an immensely different sensation this time.

Her thoughts stopped since she couldn't form them anymore, nor could she look away from the screen. She began to lose her identity. A weird static played in her head. Logic and reason began distorting themselves as her perception of reality started to fall apart, like a house made of tissue. The girl called Chiaki Nanami began to fade while a feeling that could only be described as sinking in a cold, desolate ocean overtook her. At this point, her self-awareness had fled and she fell into an enigmatic fissure.

VVV

An almost rhythmical rainfall was pouring from the dark-gray clouds above while a girl looked at the scene below. She appeared to be in a cemetery because tombstones adorned the whole area.

In this cemetery, multiple people dressed in black and holding umbrellas were gathered around a hole. They seemed to be mourning the loss of somebody. Actually, the girl recognized the sad faces. They were none other than the girl's former classmates. Most of them were in tears while others had sorrowful expressions. Also, there was a strange woman—whom she couldn't recognize since she wore a fishnet over her face—giving a eulogy.

"We've gathered here today to mourn the loss of a dear friend. She was a beautiful person that left us far too soon. Her beauty could only be surpassed by the kindness and compassion she would always show to others."

While the speaking continued, the girl's perspective changed. Now, she was in the hole the entire class had gathered around. The rainfall came down like a waterfall around her while she was powerless to move a muscle.

"Most of all…" stated the speaker. The girl's feeling of ambiguity turned to one of fright when she saw the face of the woman who was speaking. The face of despair itself, Junko Enoshima, peered down at her in amusement. "Thanks for giving me so many new friends, nobody!"

The sorrowful faces of her classmates turned to ones of pure vehemence. They all pulled shovels out of nowhere and began pouring dirt down the hole she was laying in. She wanted to scream, but no noise would emerge. She was forced to lie still while the wet earth blanketed her body.

I can't breathe…

Soon, she was mostly buried except for her right eye. A man with long hair entered her sight. Despite his face being stationary, it stood out even more than the despair-ridden faces of her classmates. His red eyes seemed to pierce her soul before her connection with the surface was entirely lost.

VVV

Chisa watched as her supposed savior was flailing what limbs she could in pure fear. The emotion in her eyes was a clear indication of what she was going through.
"Turn it off!" pleaded Chiaki because it was the only thing she knew how to do right now.

The housekeeper had to scratch her own arm to prevent herself from enjoying what she was seeing too much.

"Turn it off! Make it stop, Ms. Yukizome!"

Finally, after deciding it was counterproductive to continue, she switched off the video and removed the headphones. The gamer heavily breathed while the pain and terror evaporated as if it never existed in the first place. It was hard to blink as her whole body trembled and she felt really hot.

"The first video I showed you was ten percent of its true potency. The one you just watched was over seventy-five percent. As I'm sure you've noticed, the difference is like night and day. In order for you to build up a true immunity… I'm going to expose you to a different level of the despair video continuously until you're able to resist."

The gamer wanted to oppose that absurd proclamation, but she was still trying to gather herself. She didn't feel any pain except for a severe sense of vertigo. It was like her mind was still uploading itself.

"Let's do that again, shall we?"

"No!" Chiaki managed to exclaim. "Please, Ms. Yukizome… I can't do it again…"

Chisa's smile disappeared as she crossed her arms and said, "In order to overcome Junko Enoshima, no half-measures can be allowed. While I did say you're the savior, you won't stand a chance unless you can manage this." Her eyes narrowed a little. "You did say you regret your time at Hope's Peak Academy. Perhaps, it doesn't matter that Junko is out spreading despair, and your former classmates are in trouble."

"That isn't right…" she replied, still trying to catch her breath. While it was true she said attending Hope's Peak Academy was a mistake, she certainly didn't feel anything Chisa was accusing her of. She wanted Junko to be stopped and for her friends to be saved. However, the thought of her going through what she just did continuously sounded more like voluntary torture than training.

"Show me that girl who became the class rep and stormed the enemy base while holding on until the end—show me that person wasn't executed by Junko that day."

"…" The gamer said nothing while Chisa inserted another flash drive.

"This one is around thirty percent. If it looks bad, I'll turn it off and let your mind recuperate before starting again. Also…" she uttered while a smile crept across her face, "if it helps, you're not the only person I'm going to show this to."

Before Chiaki could think about that statement, Chisa put the headphones over her head and started the video again.

"Focus, Chiaki," plainly stated Chisa while the gamer struggled to keep the despair video from penetrating her mind.

VVV

In a certain location, there was a man bound to a chair by a rope. His face was swollen, and he had injuries all over his body. The only source of light was a dim bulb overhead. Two individuals
happened to be in the room with the ailing man. One was a woman, who was leaning against a wall; the other was also a woman, who stared down at the man.

"How does it feel knowing your interest in talent is the reason your bloodline is gonna be wiped from existence?"

"You may kill me…but my daughter and the others will stop what you have planned."

"Please don't start going on about how everyone's combined hope will be too much for me. I'm tempted to let you live so I can show you how much your hope will be worth when I'm done."

"I always knew you were suspicious, but I held my tongue because of how much the others loved you," stated the man, harshly coughing before glaring daggers at the woman. "If I had known sooner—I would've had you killed."

The woman intently looked the man in the eyes. as if she was searching for something. She sighed in boredom when she didn't find what she was looking for.

"Your death is going to be the prolog to my game. Don't worry; your daughter will probably get to see you again. Just…not in the way you'd want."

After she sensed there wasn't any more fun to be had talking to the man, she gestured to the other woman. The other woman punched him, knocking him out.

"What now? Everything is ready."

The woman smiled widely because her excitement continued to build. She had been agonizingly biding her time for months, and it was finally time for her game to begin. Perhaps, she could even rekindle that feeling she felt long ago.

"It's time to go live."
The daily regimen of the Future Foundation began to become routine to Chiaki as time passed. She'd wake up early to the alarm before performing normal morning duties like breakfast and a shower. She would converse with any new recruits in her division; it didn't happen often because few agents were put in the developmental division, and most that did weren't there for long.

She would, reluctantly, drown herself in an ever-growing stack of paperwork until early in the evening. She'd stop sometimes for lunch or a random break, but this period would mostly be reading papers and signing documents. Another bonus to her division being relatively inactive is never being bothered throughout the day with a pressing matter. She could work at a steady pace without interruption.

After the busy work, the rest of the day would be filled with Chisa telling her to do whatever she had planned. This could vary from jogging to training with shinai in the dojo and even instruction on stealth techniques.

Despite what came first, she would always force the gamer to be exposed to the despair video for hours on end. Chiaki had watched the thirty percent version many times, but she didn't seem to be making progress. Regardless, Chisa would continue to adamantly proclaim results would arise over time.

The night hours would be Chiaki's free period until she decided to sleep. She could do more paperwork, walk around the building, or immerse herself in a game for a while. Chisa would even allow her to venture into the city sometimes, but only to designated areas and only if Chisa joined while reminding her of the usual caveat about thoughts of rebellion.

Lastly, she'd go to her designated room and sort through her belongings. She didn't have much except for some clothes, old games, and an assortment of mementos she had gotten during the various trips her class had taken. Since there was nothing on television she was interested in most of the time, she'd normally play her game until exhaustion captured her. On the nights she wouldn't take her pills, she'd often be woken up by vivid nightmares, which would force her to take the pills and go back to sleep.

All in all, despite the bizarre circumstances, a sense of normalcy started to envelop the gamer's life.

The cool February air blanketed the area while Chiaki was quietly doing paperwork in her office. After signing yet another piece of paper, she slid it aside before massaging her hand. She looked out of the window in a bored manner at the partly cloudy sky. Chiaki noticed the clock and decided any further work would be pointless since Chisa usually arrived at this time. Today looked like it would be just another typical day in the Future Foundation.

"Ms. Nanami!" yelled a young black-haired man, running through the office entrance she always left open. He looked out of breath as if he had run a marathon.

"What's wrong?" she asked with an alert expression. The man wasn't anyone from her division, so she figured it was one of Chisa's.

"Turn on the television!"

After she found the remote in one of her desk drawers and pressed the power button, the television clicked on to reveal a stunning sight. Several individuals that looked to be around Chiaki's age were crowded around a gymnasium—a gymnasium she recognized.

"Is that…Hope's Peak Academy?" The gamer's eyes were glued to the screen.

"It's been on for over an hour now," said the man. "Whatever this is supposed to be is now broadcasting worldwide."

While the man continued to explain what he knew, the gamer winced as an ominous bear appeared on the screen and began talking in a cartoon-like voice. It was like she'd been stung in the head. "Ugh!" she whimpered as images popped into her head.

"Ms. Nanami?"

I remember now…she thought, recalling the black and white bear she saw on her execution day. After pondering it for a moment, she began to understand what was happening. That's the seventy-eight class. That means…

Almost like fate was confirming her fears, the black and white bear, calling itself Monokuma, said the chilling line, "You'll all have to kill each other!"

Her eyes widened the moment she realized who was behind this. An unprecedented feeling rose from her gut before she stormed out of her office. "I have to stop Junko before she kills them!" she yelled.

"Wait! Who's Junko—"

The gamer was already running down the hallways before the man could finish his sentence. She had suspected Junko being in Hope's Peak Academy with the seventy-eight class, but she never knew it for a fact. Now, she was sure the false fashionista was planning some kind of cruel game for her amusement. The possibility of her turning the seventy-eight class into Ultimate Despair, or worse, filled her with a burning desire to act.

She was running as fast as her legs would carry her towards the elevator, so she could travel to the control room and contact the chairman or vice chairman. She knew Chisa would have misgivings, but Chiaki figured the whole savior thing was pointless now that Junko had made her move in front of the world.

"There!" she exclaimed, approaching the elevator and rapidly pressing the button. Seconds seemed like hours while waiting for the elevator doors to open. She tapped the button over and over again, but it still didn't open. Is there too much activity? It shouldn't be taking this long.

After another minute of waiting, she ran in the opposite direction. There was a stairway that could take her where she needed. It would take significantly longer than the elevator, but she was too anxious to wait any longer. Her breathing began to get heavier before she finally spotted the door leading to the stairway.

Chiaki hastily opened the door—only to find out someone was already there.

"You look like you're in a hurry," playfully stated Chisa. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

The gamer slowly backed away before scanning the ground as she murmured, "It's over, Ms. Yukizome. Once everybody sees Junko, the secret will be out. I'm sorry I couldn't be the savior you wanted…but if we confess what we know—"
"Our plans haven't changed," she replied, cutting Chiaki off. "There is no proof of any connection between us and Junko. If she does reveal herself, it won't put us at risk."

"What about the seventy-eight class? Their lives are in danger…"

"Why should I care?" Chisa's nonchalant attitude began to frustrate the gamer. "They chose to shut themselves inside the school and turn their backs on the world like a bunch of cowards. If their haven becomes their prison—too bad."

"They don't deserve to die because of it! All they wanted to do is protect each other like you and I tried to do for our class back then!"

After that outburst, Chiaki looked past her former teacher. She walked towards the door leading to the stairway, hoping Chisa understood her statements. The second the gamer's path led her next to Chisa, a hand reached out and grabbed her collar before flinging her back. She stumbled and fell to the floor in a huff.

"Why are you protecting her…?" asked Chiaki, still refusing to look at her former teacher. "Is it because all this was a lie?"

"That's enough."

"That's it. You're just waiting for your chance to let Junko execute me again…”

"I said—"

"Because all you love is despair!"

"Enough!" yelled Chisa, slamming her palm on a wall. Amazingly, this might've been the first time the duo had yelled at each other like this. A smile crept across Chisa's mouth while she placed her fingers over her face and began laughing. "You riled me up; that's really not good, you know…"

She looked down at her former student for a moment as if she was debating something. Finally, she pulled out a switchblade which instantly caught Chiaki's attention.

"You've convinced me, Chiaki. Let's play a little game of our own." Before she could even think of running away, Chisa bent down and grabbed Chiaki's arm. She pushed the button to release the blade and placed the weapon in the gamer's hand. "If you really want me to stand aside—force me."

Chiaki's mind was racing while her shaking arm held the blade. She didn't know what to do after hearing the challenge.

"I suggest aiming for the neck, personally. I won't resist."

Her heart was harshly beating while the shaking only grew worse.

"It's easy." Chisa grabbed the hand Chiaki held the knife in and pressed it to her neck. Her smiling face didn't falter in the slightest. "Do it."

Even though she wanted to help the seventy-eight class, what she was being told to do was more than she could handle. The ramifications of her actions were one thing, but actually taking a life was still something she couldn't do. In addition, she didn't think it was in her to kill Chisa, even knowing she was in despair now. Chiaki dropped the blade to the floor while Chisa giggled.
"Whether the Future Foundation knows Junko's identity is pointless. Hope's Peak is going to be nearly impossible to safely infiltrate—you'd be confessing for no reason." Chisa picked up the blade before putting it back in her pocket. "Now walk, young lady."

Chiaki didn't have any kind of response, so she rose and did as told. It felt like a walk of shame when the duo went back to her office. They arrived to see the door was still ajar.

"After you," stated Chisa.

The moment she walked into her office, she saw something that almost made her faint.

She fell to the floor in horror as a terrifying scene was in front of her. The dead body of the man who alerted her about the broadcast was placed right in the middle of her office. From what she could tell, someone had cut his throat. Despite how horrendous the past year has been, this marked the first time she'd seen a dead body up close. It was obvious how different seeing one in real life was.

"Oh, my!" yelled Chisa, with an expression of fright. "This is bad. If someone saw this dead body in your office, we could have a situation on our hands."

Chisa pulled out her phone and took pictures so fast that Mahiru would've been proud. Without question, if someone saw those pictures, Chiaki would be incriminated.

"What are you—"

"Just wait here, sweetie. I know the perfect way of taking care of this so no one ever finds out." Chisa walked towards the door and slightly turned her head towards the frightened gamer. "Don't open this door for anybody until I get back, alright?"

Chiaki saw the faintest hint of a smile before Chisa closed the door. She continued to sit while the only company she had was the dead body and the killing game broadcast. She proceeded to pull at her own hair and bury her face in her knees. It was a rare occasion, but she felt like screaming out of pure exasperation.

However, she kept quiet while the killing game continued.

VVV

The Future Foundation went into full code red after the broadcast had begun. Kyosuke was in the command center doing many things at once: he was running around, constantly staying updated, keeping an eye on the current activity of the Despairs, and was barking orders left and right.

"I just heard the news!" yelled Juzo, entering the command center along with Koichi. "What the hell is going on!"

"There have been multiple reports of several coordinated attacks happening around the globe as a result of the Despairs! It seems to all be centered around this supposed killing game!"

On the biggest screen in the command center, the killing game was being shown. The moment a certain blond fashionista's face appeared, Juzo felt ice enter his veins. She looked a bit different, but he was sure that was the woman who embarrassed and blackmailed him into lying. The boxer wished he could jump through the screen and strangle the woman with his own hands.

"Did Kirigiri betray us!" yelled Juzo, slamming his knuckles so hard into a desk that it caused an indent. "Was this the reason he wanted to stay in the school!"
"Jin is not working with the Despairs," stated Koichi, adjusting his fedora before intently looking at Kyosuke, which was uncommon for the scout. "Munakata, I want you to give me clearance to launch an infiltration of the school. I have a few people I know will join me."

The vice chairman didn't think favorably of the suggestion, but Koichi seemed steadfast in his decision.

"Very well," Kyosuke agreed. "However, retreat if your efforts seem futile."

The scout nodded before he hurriedly took his leave.

"Let me join too!" added Juzo, wanted nothing more than to get to Junko. "I can mobilize my entire division right now and—"

"No," Kyosuke answered. "The most pressing matter right now is the various attacks the Despairs have launched. I'll need your division to remain on standby until it's decided how you're utilized."

"But…"

"Now, Sakakura!"

Juzo clenched his fists when the command was bluntly issued. He knew better than anyone there was no arguing with Kyosuke. He walked out of the command room before stopping in the hallway and hitting the wall.

"Goddammit! I swear I'll kill her with my own hands before they find out…"

VVV

The next days were a constant flurry of activity. Nearly every agent in the Future Foundation was busy with the current global ordeal. They were in full counterattack mode because the Despairs were more active than they've ever been. Nearly every division leader was more busy with the new influx of work.

All except one.

Chiaki was laying her head on the office desk. The last few days have been nothing but heavy rain as if the Earth was trying to cleanse itself of all the malevolence and violence taking place. The killing game was still in full swing, but Chiaki refused to look at it. Just listening to the broadcast made her think about the execution. The gamer was ordered to remain on standby until any orders were given. She turned her head when the despair loving housekeeper walked in.

"I'll be gone for a few days, so our sessions will be put on hold awhile. I expect you to keep up your daily training, minus the despair video exposure."

"Alright…"

Chisa was about to leave until she saw the melancholic look the gamer had. "Chiaki, if you ever need some kind of motivator, remember this."

The gamer looked at her former teacher in interest since she was speaking in a gentle tone. Actually, her entire demeanor seemed genuine.

"When Kamakura saved you, he could've changed you in multiple ways because his abilities would make it possible. However, he didn't. He felt that you, the quiet and average gamer, would be a
match for Junko's despair just as you are. Even if you never believe me, remember that a being with more ability than you and I can comprehend thought you were good enough—alright?"

Chisa left Chiaki alone with her thoughts. After closing the door behind her, the housekeeper stared at the ceiling with a phlegmatic look. *The pendulum has finally begun swinging…*

**VVV**

The chairman of the Future Foundation was sitting at his desk while rubbing his head. He'd barely gotten any sleep over the last couple of days since the broadcast began.

His gaze narrowed when he thought about not only the dire situation of the Future Foundation but the world as a whole. While it has been a few months, he thought things would be proceeding more smoothly at this point. Nonetheless, it seemed as if things were getting worse. The old man's thoughts of cynicism stopped when his guest walked in.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" asked Ryouta with his usual exhausted expression.

"Have a seat, Mitarai. How far have you gotten on that undertaking you discussed with me?"

"I…still haven't perfected it yet. I just can't seem to make it the way I want. Why do you ask, sir?"

Kazuo stroked his beard with an apathetic look. "There's a request I want you to hear."

**VVV**

"That's enough for today everyone!" cheered Usami, as Miaya commanded her.

The therapist, along with the top agents in her division, was working overtime on the development of an extremely classified project she was in charge of. They had made significant progress in a short amount of time because of the huge funding the Future Foundation dedicated to the task. Even so, they had hit a roadblock that was proving difficult to overcome.

*Yasuke Matsuda's data has been invaluable, but it's still missing something. It still feels too automated and superficial. We're missing the crucial piece that will allow the artificial intelligence to seem more alive.* She thought hard about what they could do, but no answer presented itself. *Until we find what we need, the Neo World Program might not advance past this level…*

**VVV**

The harsh rain pounded the area while the sound of thunder could be heard in the distance. The street lamps illuminated the empty roads while a man stood atop a tall building with a Future Foundation base in the distance. He didn't have a particular reason to do this, but here he was, regardless. The rainfall soaked his suit and made his long hair stick to his body. The man didn't so much as flinch when an individual approached from behind.

"Not a very lovely night for a walk," commented Chisa, holding an umbrella. "Perhaps, you prefer this kind of weather, Kamakura?" The artificially created Ultimate Hope didn't answer while Chisa walked beside him. "How have my former students been?"

"I don't know what you're referring to," answered Izuru in his usual concise manner.

"Hmm? Surely you can't have forgotten them?"

Izuru was silent for a moment. "If what you claim is true, I must've altered my own memories to
"As thorough as I would expect from you." Chisa happened to glance down and see Izuru grasping a familiar object. The housekeeper smiled when she realized her assertion about Izuru was correct. "I'm sure you'd be able to break in and see her without anyone knowing. She'd be...interested in meeting you again."

"I have no reason to do that."

"Heh, right. You just came to observe for your own interests. In reality, you're no different than the woman you despise so much."

Chisa felt a chill when Izuru glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Even in despair, she knew toying with someone who could murder her within a second wasn't worth it.

The housekeeper kept her mischievous side under control while she said, "I suppose I can't lecture you on that, considering I was also used. The only difference now is you're the one forcing a task on me."

"Forcing wouldn't be the correct word for you."

"Alright, you've caught me. Your prediction of the plan I would make was right on the money. It's proving to be a lot more...fulfilling than I thought it would be. Honestly, I don't have the slightest clue how all this will end. Although, if that question had a simple answer...it would probably be boring for you."

With a final smirk, Chisa walked away from Izuru as the thunder overhead made a loud bang.

"I'll continue to do what I've been doing. If this killing game Junko has begun ends how I think, things will get intriguing. But...I don't need to tell you that. Oh, and keep Ultimate Despair away from her. We don't need any more complications."

The housekeeper departed, leaving Izuru alone while the harsh rain continued to barrage the Earth.

VVV

Chiaki was standing while leaning on the window of her office. The sound of rain colliding on the glass with the sight of the artificially lit city in the distance was strangely soothing. The broadcast was showing replays of the previous day since it was past curfew. Killing had already happened in just a few days. She didn't look at Junko's supposed early death in the game, but Chisa instantly debunked it when she informed her it was a misdirection. Prior to the killing game, she didn't think things could get stranger.

Lightning flashed as someone decide to join the gamer.

"Why, hello again," welcomed the false Junko, sitting in Chiaki's chair with her feet propped up on the desk. "I thought you were done calling me? You couldn't resist seeing my pretty face, right?"

"...Why are you doing all of this?" the gamer asked. "Who are you...Junko Enoshima?"

"I've only said it a billion times: I want despair."

"...Is that really it?"

"Look for yourself," she responded before pointing to the television. "You think I'm doing all this
for the hell of it? Well…actually, I do—but you get the point. Maybe you can ask the real me when you meet her again."

"The Future Foundation and the seventy-eight class will beat you—we'll never see each other again."

"Do you really think this will end like some boring fight decided off-screen? You should know better than me…this is all a game. This game between you and me won't quietly fade into the night. The thing about opposites is…they attract."

Another loud crash of thunder was heard before Chiaki turned her head to see Junko had disappeared. She looked down before glancing back out the window. Chiaki had decided to walk towards the future like she promised Miaya, but all the future seemed like was an endless dark abyss filled with nothing but dead ends.

VVV

"Shit…” swore a blond woman, sitting in a chair while observing multiple monitors at once. In her boredom, she drew on a wide sketchpad. She didn't know why, but the woman just felt the urge to draw this particular picture.

Finally, she finished the picture after hours of constant work. It was incredibly rare for something so menial to hold her attention for that long, but she had been diligent in this endeavor. The picture turned out to be a landscape sketch of a girl with curled hair and eyes that were cast downward.

Yet—she was smiling.

The woman observed the picture before clicking her tongue and tossing the sketchpad aside. There was a look of emptiness in her cold eyes while the monitor lights were reflected in them.

"This despair…is not enough…”

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

The chapter concludes the first phase of this story. The next part will be pretty different in tone from this first half of Bloom. Also, there's a surprise at the end of the next chapter for everyone. Thank you for reading this far!
Save the Distrust

Chapter Notes

We're at the start of a new phase, and there's a surprise after the end of the chapter!

A bright city illuminated the dark desert sky. This famous city had many nicknames such as Sin City or the Gambling Capital, but it's officially known as Las Vegas. The bustling city had become a popular cesspool for those who follow despair since the Tragedy began.

In the brightly lit city, a celebration was being held in an exclusive club. Loud music blared while many women in masks and costumes danced around. There were two grown men sitting across from each other in their crisp black suits. Bright multicolored lights flooded the room as a notorious mafia syndicate was indulging themselves.

"Despite the recent decline in despair activity, we shouldn't be affected," stated one of the men holding a cigar. "Ever since that crazy bitch went and killed herself, doing business has been getting harder."

"Those damn fascists in the Future Foundation have been getting bolder lately too," claimed the other man. "They're busting anyone for even being suspected of working with the Despairs."

"It's nothing we need to worry about. Their influence isn't as bad here in the United States." The man gestured for one of the women to give him a refill. After a seductive walk, she did as ordered. "Besides, as far as the Future Foundation knows, they've got zero on us."

"I hear they've been launching sting operations and raids all across big cities in the country. Apparently, the government has given them clearance to act as they wish."

"There are gangs crawling all around Vegas. Those assholes wouldn't dare step foot in this city." The man took a hearty sip of his drink before spitting it out. "What the hell is—" His sentence stopped as his whole body tensed up. He realized his drink must've been laced with something.

"Now!" yelled the woman into a communication device.

Canisters crashed through the windows and filled the room with a thick smokescreen. All of the gang members were in a panic since their visibility had been cut. However, the opposing group of individuals entered the club wore special glasses—allowing them to detect enemies in the blanket of smoke. They quickly and efficiently made arrests and took down the ones attempting to resist or escape.

"The damn Future Foundation!" yelled the man, who was previously having the conversation.

He rose out of his chair and ran to the back. He knew another exit that would allow him to escape the anti-despair organization. He exploded out of the back entrance and ran through an alley. For a second, he assumed it was alright until he looked over his shoulder to see a hooded figure giving chase.

"Dammit!"
He scaled and jumped over a fence, hoping that would throw off his pursuer. A swear escaped his mouth when his follower easily got past the obstacle. The man then ran into a busy Vegas road to scare off his follower. Steeling his nerves, he ran through the traffic. While he made it to the other side, the pursuer was still hot on his trail.

The chase continued until he hit a dead end in an alley. He turned around in dismay to see the hooded figure was blocking the only exit.

"Die, asshole!" he yelled, pulling out a revolver and firing. The figure ran towards him and did something on a futuristic watch-like object around their wrist. The man's jaw dropped when he saw the bullets be deflected by an invisible force. "What the hell!"

He was going to pull out his knife until the figure touched the object around their wrist again. Up close, a weird glove covered their hand before the pursuer touched the man with it. The man felt his entire body lock up, meaning he had been electrocuted. He fell to the ground with a grunt, unable to move. The hooded figure proceeded to handcuff him.

"You Future Foundation pigs sure are tough—hiding behind that bullshit technology."

"That bullshit technology just took down all your men, George Cornell," stated a new voice. It was a woman in a white coat who's smile was chilling. "Good work, my little cinnamon roll."

The former Ultimate Gamer removed her hood and revealed her stoic expression. "He's been apprehended, Ms. Yukizome," she said.

"I should be honored the Future Foundation sent two of its division leaders after me. Nice English by the way, you Japanese whore."

"Thank you," smiled Chisa before stomping the man in the side, which made him grunt in pain. "English was one of my better subjects."

"Tch, the Future Foundation are the real thugs. You have no proof I've been working with the Despairs."

"You're anything but clean. Be thankful our protocols have changed, or I could do as I see fit right here with no consequence."

"Go to hell, bitch. You're not getting a single word out of me or my men."

"Is that so?" Chisa roughly grabbed the man by the collar. The man had seen a lot of things, but the housekeeper's expression sent chills through his body. "T-take it easy…"

"We'll be spending a lot of quality time after this, you piece of shit." She threw him to the ground. "It's a shame your first trip to America had to do with work. If you want, we can—" Chisa stopped her sentence when she saw the gamer had already walked away. The housekeeper laughed under her breath. "Isn't she just a peach?"

VVV

The main headquarters of the Future Foundation, currently, contained all of the division leaders. They all sat at the long table in the dimly lit room while discussing current affairs.

Chiaki was quietly sitting while playing her game since these meetings were always boring for her.
There was a time she didn't do this for fear of being disrespectful, but she didn't care too much now. Nobody ever stopped her, and she never said anything at these meetings, so it became routine after a while.

"In other news, the total population of Despairs has decreased four percent this month alone," stated Usami while Miaya pulled up numbers and statistics on the screen. "The total number of casualties and property damage related to Despairs has also continued to steadily decrease. The trend of despair related activities calming down is still going smoothly since Junko Enoshima's death."

The uttering of that name made everyone picture the despair diva, but none more than Chiaki. She'll never forget the day Junko executed herself six months ago. The smile she had before her death would be forever branded in the gamer's mind. Chiaki remembered just staring at the television in her office—not knowing what to think. No emotions of happiness, gratification, or elation visited her. There was just a numbness still felt to this day while she aimlessly carried on with her life.

"It seems the Remnants of Despair really is the final defense of Junko Enoshima's legacy," stated Seiko. "If only we knew their identities or whereabouts."

"We're getting closer to the truth, according to Yukizome's sources," explained Kyosuke. "It would've been preferential to bring Enoshima in for interrogation."

"We can thank the proclaimed heroes in the seventy-eight class," stated Ruruka with resentment in her voice while Sonosuke was peacefully lying in her lap. "It must've felt good letting your friend die on her own terms, right, Kirigiri?"

The ever composed former Ultimate Detective impassively stared at Ruruka with her pale eyes and said, "Junko Enoshima was never a friend. Her goal from the beginning was to further her own goals for despair. We were fooled, just like you all."

Ruruka, who was often annoyed by Kyoko's attitude, clicked her tongue. "You all were around Enoshima, and you never noticed anything. It's crazy enough we've allowed that murdering psycho, Toko Fukawa, to work for us instead of killing her—not to mention that idiot bum."

"Fukawa has followed all your rules and demands. If she ever does something wrong, you're free to do whatever you want with her. However, instead of blaming me, you should be thanking Naegi and us for defeating someone you couldn't."

"Thanking you?" stated Kyosuke, glaring at Kyoko. "The only reason I didn't blow that school to hell was that the deaths of innocent kids would've been a bad look for the Future Foundation. I left you alive because of a technicality, and if we didn't come to your rescue, you would've died regardless. Don't let your victory over Junko Enoshima delude you—it was something I allowed to happen…and it was nothing but pure, dumb luck."

Kyoko looked prepared to come right back at him until Gozu interrupted.

"That's enough you two. Munakata, what they did was an amazing feat that shouldn't be written off by saying it was just luck. Kirigiri, we have saved you all, restored your memories, and even instated you as head of the Fourteenth Division. Let's be thankful we're all alive."

"I am in agreement with Gozu," said Kazuo. "The survivors of the seventy-eighth class have been helpful to the organization, and they have very strong public support. However, the matter of the
Remnants of Despair is worrying."

"Why don't you just get the savior to do it?" snidely stated Juzo. "At least she'd be finally doing something useful."

Chiaki didn't show any difference in body language because she was used to this by now. Her being the savior had become a running joke within the organization. Despite Chisa proudly proclaiming her to be the trump card, she hadn't been all that important in the grand scheme of things.

"Don't be rude, Sakakura!" scolded Usami. "She has done a lot for the Future Foundation."

"That's correct," cut in Chisa. "Just a few days ago, she chased down and arrested an infamous target we've been pursuing for months."

"Shouldn't be hard with that million dollar piece of technology that Ando gave her to do jobs she's too lazy to handle herself."

"I don't appreciate that accusation," countered Ruruka, not denying what Juzo said.

"Most of you won't say it, but that whole savior thing was a load of bull, just like I said it would be. She never says anything in these meetings and just plays that damn game. Using an entire division for developmental was stupid. I think she should be demoted and have the entire Thirteenth Division remade."

"I don't see how that's fair," added Chisa. "She has done her job and always meets her deadlines. If we just demote an employee unjustly, what kind of example would we be setting?"

"We also can't forget she went through something none of us ever have," added Ryouta in a quiet voice. "I think we should focus on the good she has done."

"Everyone here is well aware of what happened, but we can't allow pity to be an excuse for everything," proclaimed Kyosuke. "Nanami will be evaluated on her efforts, just like everyone else. Although, it would be nice to have a grown woman contribute to the discussion instead of immersing herself in a device for kids." Chiaki didn't respond which made the vice chairman sigh in annoyance.

"Discussing this is pointless," cut in Kyoko. "We need to focus on using every available resource to find and arrest the Remnants of Despair. Once they're gone, the fight against despair will be decided."

"Kirisigiri is right," agreed Koichi, smiling at Kyoko before she looked away. "I'm curious to see what they are. It might reveal some…new facts about the Tragedy."

"Since we've discussed everything and no one has another comment," began the chairman, waiting to see if someone would speak up, "this meeting is adjourned. May this further lead us on our path to a better future."

VVV

The gamer instantly approached Miaya after the meeting, but when the therapist told her she needed to discuss something with Kyosuke first, Chiaki decided to venture to the food court.

It was hectic, just like it always was when all the division leaders were in one place. Chiaki settled for a simple bowl of soba noodles and sat at a solitary table in the corner. She'd get occasional
stares and greetings from people jokingly referring to her as the savior. Chiaki's reputation within the Future Foundation was the woman who should've died that was oddly called the savior and liked games.

It has been over a year now since Chiaki woke up from her coma. The majority of her time was still filled with menial tasks and doing whatever Chisa wanted. While it has been improving, she was still dealing with some sudden flashes or insomnia as a result of the execution. She had accepted those would always be a part of her.

Another change was the object around her wrist she had received a few weeks after Junko's death.

VVV

"What is this?" asked Chiaki, holding a futuristic looking watch-like device in her hand that Sonosuke handed her. The duo was alone in the gamer's office on a cloudy afternoon. The device had a rectangular touch screen with buttons you'd see on a game controller being shown on it.

"That is a device made with nanotechnology. It's been given the name VEIL, which means Variation Efficiency Innovative Liberator. I modified it so it could accommodate your talents."

"You can make a weapon like this?"

"I modified it from an already existing piece of technology. The Future Foundation is always developing new weapons because we have so much backing in that area. Try it on whichever arm is your dominant one."

As instructed, the gamer placed it over her right wrist before it locked itself with a click sound.

"It would be in your best interest to memorize these."

The blacksmith handed her a piece of paper with codes written on it. The codes were entered into Chiaki's brain because they looked like cheat codes you'd put into a game. She assumed it had something to do with VEIL because the touchscreen displayed the same buttons.

"Since you're the former Ultimate Gamer, I designed it to utilize the ability to remember cheat codes and being able to quickly enter them. Once you enter a code on the touchscreen, VEIL will react and perform whatever function you ordered. I suggest practicing because speed will be—"

Chiaki entered a random code she already memorized so rapidly, Sonosuke could barely keep up. After the code was entered, a strange silver alloy enveloped her hand like an extra layer of skin.

"Don't face it towards you!" yelled Sonosuke, quickly grabbing her arm and pointing it at her desk.

Suddenly, a high-pitched, invisible pulse shot out and sent papers flying everywhere. The gamer would've fallen to the ground by the sudden kickback if Sonosuke wasn't holding her.

"That was like a weapon out of a game…" said Chiaki, looking at VEIL in amazement.

"Make absolutely sure you aren't facing your palm towards yourself or an ally if you're about to use it."

Nodding, Chiaki continued to look at VEIL to see it had reverted back to its previous form. "…Is it really okay for me to have this?"

"All division leaders are given these kinds of privileges. This was also a promise from Ruruka."
"Why doesn't everyone use this kind of weapon, then?"

"The field is still in its early stages and weapons like guns are still easier and more practical in many ways. One of the vice chairman's katana does utilize nanotechnology, though." Izayoi turned around. "Make sure to keep your promise to Ruruka. Also, remember VEIL is your partner now." He glanced back at the gamer and gave her a steely gaze. "Treat it with respect." He departed, leaving the gamer alone with her new device.

* A unique weapon only I can use to its full potential…

VVV

VEIL had proven itself to be very useful. It had many helpful functions like electromagnetic barriers that can deflect bullets for a quick period, a potent taser, and a few other functions. VEIL was also resistant to heat and water. Doing whatever work Ruruka occasionally pushed on her was annoying, but she couldn't complain because of the usefulness of VEIL.

While she was still thinking, an individual she had never conversed with sat across from her.

"Mind if I join you?" asked Kyoko, holding a steaming cup that likely contained coffee since that's what the detective usually drinks.

Chiaki didn't mind at all, so she gave no misgivings.

Kyoko took a sip of her coffee before she said, "There's something I'd like to inquire about, if that's okay."

The gamer was hesitant since Kyoko was the former Ultimate Detective—she, obviously, had something to hide—but it would seem more suspicious to deny her. "Inquire about what?"

"I took a look at your files and had some questions I wanted to ask."

"…You've been investigating me?"

"Once I joined the Future Foundation, I made sure to know who all my subordinates were. Your circumstances stood out to me, especially."

Chiaki started to feel like this talk was about to turn into an interrogation. It might've been that Kyoko simply came off like that, but it was still frustrating. "Unless you think me almost dying is interesting, I'm pretty sure there's nothing unique about me."

"I'm sorry that happened to you." Kyoko gave her a soft look as if she could relate to her suffering.

"Do you remember the exact day you were abducted?"

"I can't remember…" Chiaki was lying, but she figured it was better to play ignorant. "Everything is a blur—all I remember is the pain."

"That's normal for torture victims. What were the last events you recall?"

"I attended my class like normal, and I stayed after school with some friends. The last thing I remember is walking to my dorm at night. After that, it's all vague images."

"Yukizome had already been reinstated in the main course by that time, right?" Chiaki nodded. "What of Nagito Komaeda?"

The gamer paused. "…I don't know; he never came back to school."
"According to the Hope's Peak Academy records, he was suspended indefinitely for an incident. Not only that, but the Future Foundation never found his or any of your classmates' bodies to this day. Do you know what could've happened to them?"

"I had already been captured before the school shut down. I didn't know what happened until I was told."

"Another matter that bothered me is your disappearance was never reported."

"Ms. Yukizome was scared and tried to look for me. The Parade was getting really bad from what they've told me too. She confessed to everyone, and I've forgiven her."

"I just find it odd that a group of individuals, who respected you enough to elect you the class representative, never wondered or asked where you were. Yukizome's reasoning is odd as well. Being silent about one of her students vanishing during a hostile time because of the fear of backlash? I would think your well-being is more important to her than reputation."

Kyoko looked down because she was thinking while Chiaki wished this conversation would come to an end.

The whole back and forth was making her more uncomfortable by the word. It reminded her of the time Miaya was getting close to the truth; however, Miaya always had a gentle approach and put her feelings first. Kyoko's piercing eyes felt like they were trying to peer into her psyche and were constantly connecting points. If it wasn't obvious before, Kyoko's mannerisms told Chiaki her detective acumen was no fluke.

"Did I do something wrong, Kirigiri…?"

"I'm just trying to get a clearer picture of the events surrounding the academy. The issue of your missing classmates is noteworthy. Furthermore," began Kyoko, gazing right at Chiaki, "if someone else was helping Enoshima, or even if it was you—"

"That's a lie!" countered Chiaki, raising her voice so suddenly, Kyoko was caught off guard. Both division leaders noticed people staring and whispering among themselves. The gamer looked away with a slightly doleful look. "You shouldn't get too close to me, Kirigiri. Terrible things always happen to people around me…"

Chiaki was referring to the fate of her classmates and teacher, but it sounded somewhat like a threat from Kyoko's perspective.

"Salutations!" announced Chisa, arriving with Miaya following. "What are you two talking about?"

"I was just leaving, actually," answered Kyoko, standing up. "Thank you for answering my questions, Nanami." The detective stuck out her hand before the gamer shook it. She walked away while Chisa followed.

"I'll see Kirigiri out. Call me when you're done, Chiaki."

…I wonder if she'll keep investigating me? thought Chiaki, watching the detective and housekeeper leave the food court.

"I know being a detective runs through your blood," began Chisa, "but you don't have to be suspicious of everybody. That's a good way to make a working environment stressful."

"I was merely acting on a suspicion I had. I don't think Nanami is working with the Despairs."
"Of course she's not." Kyoko was surprised when Chisa gently grabbed one of her hands and clasped it in both of hers. "Have faith in your co-workers. I'm sure you and Nanami would get along great. You both do nothing but brood so much, I'm surprised your faces aren't stuck that way." Chisa let go of her hand while the detective smiled a little at the housekeeper's zesty attitude. "Besides, nobody in the Future Foundation is a traitor."

"I suppose you should know that…"

"What does that mean?"

"Your division handles information and espionage. I meant if a traitor was found, you should be the first to know."

"Naturally." Both women stopped in front of the elevator. "Don't let the Ultimate Housekeeper title fool you—I'm quite capable."

"I won't deny that." The elevator doors opened and Kyoko stepped inside. However, before the doors closed, she put her hand in the way. "I shouldn't have pressed Nanami as hard as I did, especially since it was our first meeting. Even after knowing her incident, I was insensitive. Please tell her I apologize."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. Nanami is strong."

Kyoko's pale eyes vanished behind the elevator doors.

Definitely her father's daughter. If she's not careful, she might end up like he did. Chisa smiled at the insidious thought.

Meanwhile, back at the food court, Chiaki was talking to Miaya for the first time since Kyoko was inducted into their ranks. They both discussed what they've been up to the last few months. Chiaki would recount the times she went into the field, and Miaya mentioned how much progress was being made on the project she was in charge of, due to new data gathered from Chihiro Fujisaki.

"Why don't you talk at meetings?" asked Usami.

"…I never have anything to add," she responded with a downcast expression. "It's not like they expect anything from me, and the whole savior thing has turned into a joke. Even in the Future Foundation, I think I'm still that same little girl from my childhood."

"Poppycock!"

"Um…gesundheit?"

"No, silly! What you're saying is ridiculous. You're successfully running your division, and you've arrested criminals like a cool heroine from a game."

"Like that woman who explores tombs?"

"Exactly…!" Miaya decided to just agree since she wasn't sure what Chiaki was referencing. "Regardless of who says what, you've done beautifully. Now, I have to get going. Things are mellowing out, but there's still so much work to be done."

"You have to leave already?" The gamer looked sad since she wanted to talk more.

The therapist, just like always, noticed her melancholy. "I'll tell you what: I might have a special
"surprise for you soon. Consider it a late birthday present…or a really early one."

The gamer perked up while she asked, "What kind of surprise?"

"Assuming things go well, I'll be able to show you something most people have never gotten to experience!"

"Okay," happily answered the gamer.

"Good luck with your work, then! Love! Love!"

Chiaki arched an eyebrow at that last phrase.

"...I've been trying out some new positive catchphrases. Was that one too much?"

"No," answered Chiaki, smiling. "I think it's perfect for Usami." The gamer watched the therapist roll away. She couldn't help but wonder what Miaya had planned.

VVV

After leaving the main headquarters of the Future Foundation, Chiaki spent the next day working in her office until Chisa arrived. As usual, she was exposed to the brainwashing video so she could develop a resistance. Amazingly, the despair video sessions were actually starting to show results.

"That's my girl," complemented Chisa, turning off the video and removing the headphones. "You have officially resisted the fifty percent version."

Chiaki was breathing hard while Chisa undid her restraints. The gamer had refrained from asking a certain question, but she decided to finally try. "...Why are we still doing this, Ms. Yukizome? Junko is dead."

"The results of the mutual killing game is irrelevant."

The gamer sighed since she knew Chisa would give a dismissive answer like that. "Shouldn't we be worried? Once they find out our class are remnants, they'll start to figure out we've been lying."

"Ninety-nine percent of information within this organization goes through me, and I have access to all of it. You don't have to be afraid of Kirigiri or someone breaking down your door and arresting you. Just leave all those trivialities to me, my cute little savior."

"Nobody believes I'm the savior but you. If anybody is, I think it's Naegi since he defeated Junko and people in and out of the Future Foundation have been calling him Ultimate Hope."

"Makoto Naegi is someone worthy of the title, I suppose. He, Kirigiri, and the rest of the survivors did something our class couldn't do...which was overcome Junko."

Chiaki only felt worse after hearing those words. She didn't hold any resentment—but Chisa's words, admittedly, stung.

"But...Kamakura didn't save Naegi, Kirigiri, or anybody else on this planet. I'll say it as many times as I need. The only one who can be the savior is you."

"Junko has already been defeated, so maybe it wasn't necessary. Even though she's gone, my friends are never going to be normal—you'll never be you again..."

"...That may be true," began Chisa, opening the door, "but that's what makes the future so fun.
"You sure about this, Munakata?" asked Juzo while the two men were in the vice chairman's office. Despite the boxer still being his right-hand man, it had been tense between them ever since Junko revealed herself. Kyosuke accepted Juzo had made a mistake in not figuring out Junko was the despair mastermind back then, but things had gotten less friend-like and more business-like.

"This could lead us to two primary targets. The capture of both of them is imperative."

"So, is it just me?"

"No," answered Kyosuke, pushing the briefing file towards him. "A few agents will accompany you as well as two designated division leaders."

Once Juzo saw the two names, he made a sour face and asked, "Are you serious? I'll just get some people in my division to—"

"This is your mission, Sakakura. Your task will commence tomorrow at noon, effective immediately. I expect you to thoroughly brief your partners on the situation. That'll be all."

Juzo wanted to argue, but the vice chairman had already begun talking to someone on the phone. The boxer left the office while dreading what the next day would bring.

What a pain in the ass…

He decided to stop by the gym to work out his frustration on a punching bag that may or may not have been in the shape of Makoto.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

1. Normally, after a story arch, the following chapter will feature some random skits, which are just light pieces of dialogue that won't have any implication on the main story.

Random Skit #1 Upgrade

"You know, Gekkogahara," began Koichi, "your wheelchair really is a neat piece of technology."

"Thanks!" answered Usami. "I designed it myself. With it, I can get work done while I'm moving, and I don't have to put too much stress on my frail body."

"Heh, why don't you install anti-despair weapons like rockets and make it a cool transforming robot?"

"Robots and rockets—don't be silly!"

Random Skit #2 Top Chef
"Why the hell am I doing this?" asked a disgruntled Juzo. Apparently, Daisaku and Ruruka were having a contest to see whether fruits or sweets were more delicious.

"We need you to tell us which is better," answered Daisaku.

"I already know who'll win, but it would be nice if you can confirm it for me," added Ruruka with Sonosuke close behind.

The boxer sighed before he was handed an apple and a cookie. He took a bite of the apple and felt a rush of flavor envelop his taste buds. He had to will himself not to eat another bite of the delicious snack. Such a combination of sweetness and juiciness felt heavenly. Then, he went for the cookie.

It isn't necessary, but I mixed one of Seiko's concoctions into my treat, thought Ruruka. Victory is assured.

Once Juzo ate the cookie, a weird sensation built in his gut. Next thing he knew, his legs were rapidly carrying him to the nearest bathroom.

"Guess I win!" cheerfully announced Daisaku.

"B-but, how!" asked a bewildered Ruruka.

In another location, Seiko raised an eyebrow when she examined a bottle. Why would anybody steal laxatives…?

Random Skit #3 Bad Ecstasy

"Would you mind reading that report to me, Kyosuke?" asked Chisa while the duo was communicating on the phone.

"Very well. Several victims were found in critical condition."

Oh, my…thought Chisa while Kyosuke reading the despair-filled sentence made her blush. She had to hug her arms to calm herself down.

"Many of them were just minors."

Goodness…

"The means of torture varied from stabbing to dismemberment."

That's it…

"Many of them had a very low chance of survival."

Almost there…!

"Luckily, all of them were saved and are making a great recovery."

"…" The disappointed housekeeper hung up.

Random Skit #4 Better With Age

"Hyah!" yelled Gozu, breaking a pile of cinder blocks with pure strength. He and Chairman Tengan were, currently, in the gym by themselves.
“Most impressive, Gozu. Mind if I try next?”

“Help yourself. Maybe you should start slow since your age might not—”

Kazuo proceeded to break the cinder blocks with incredible ease. "How was that?"

“…Good work."

Random Skit #5 Sour Nostalgia

“That was a great anime,” said Chiaki, talking with Ryouta. The two were reminiscing about an old anime in her hospital room.

“It was one of the anime that inspired me to create my own. The character development, plot, and music were better than a lot of newer shows.”

“Yeah, it makes me sad when people won't give it a chance because it's too old or out of their genre.”

“They're wasting a great opportunity. Nothing is worse than an anime having a promising story, premise, and characters; but still turn out to be disappointing. Especially, when characters end up unjustly suffering for it.”

“…” Chiaki narrowed her eyes before staring out of the window. "That is pretty annoying…"
"This is my report on the two targets," stated Chisa, handing Kyosuke a file. The two close friends, now in the vice chairman's office, were discussing information about two Despairs the Future Foundation had been pursuing for months.

Kyosuke looked over the report with incredible speed before addressing Chisa. "How confident are you in this?"

"I'm rather certain there will be some kind of event in the location I pointed out. It's likely those two will be present. Still, I can't say with one-hundred percent certainty this will be what we're looking for."

Kyosuke turned to his laptop and began looking through schedules of the division leaders. Using his better judgment, he quickly decided how he wanted the task to be handled. "Sakakura will lead the mission along with however many agents he deems necessary. I'll also add Kirigiri for backup."

"Those two are good choices." Chisa narrowed her eyes. "I think Chiaki would make a great addition as well."

Kyosuke looked at her smiling face before sighing. "Why do you still continue to believe in that girl so much? I'm surprised you haven't hailed Makoto Naegi as the savior yet."

"Even after the death of Junko Enoshima, I still think she's the savior. You haven't won our bet yet, Kyosuke."

"…Give me a legitimate reason Nanami is necessary for this mission."

"I never said it was necessary, but it couldn't hurt. I think she's proven herself capable of holding her own out in the field. Unless you had something else for her to do, I don't see the harm."

The vice chairman pondered it for a moment before closing his eyes. "Very well. I'll add Nanami to the investigation."

"Great! Maybe I'll be able to convert you after all." Chisa was about to leave until she realized there was something else that needed addressing. "Lighten up a bit more. Work will be too hard if you never smile."

Kyosuke was silent until he slightly grinned. "Right."

After the housekeeper smiled back, she turned around and headed towards the exit. All the while, she struggled to contain her demented smile. *My foolish Kyosuke…*

VVV

It was nighttime while the gamer sat on her bed and played a game. The only light in the dim room was emanating from the television. Since Chiaki had free time, she secluded herself in her room and began playing a violent game.

She finally tore her eyes from the game when a knocking was heard at the door. After begrudgingly getting up, the gamer approached the door's peephole to see a familiar face. She opened it before walking back to bed.
"Hello, Asahina," greeted Chiaki in a monotone voice while picking up the controller and resuming the game.

"Why are you all cooped up in the dark?" asked the former Ultimate Swimming Pro with hands on her hips. She noticed the violent game her boss was playing. "Isn't that the game where you shoot and carjack people?"

"Yep," the gamer answered while gunning people down, simply because she could.

"Come on, Boss, let that lady pass the street. There you—" She stopped when the gamer pulled the trigger without mercy. "That's it!" Asahina located the light switch and flicked it on. Next, she turned off the game system and television.

"I was playing that…"

"Not anymore. You're going to hang out with me in the lounge."

"I don't wanna."

"That's not the right attitude!" The swimmer proceeded to grab Chiaki's shoulders and roughly shake her. This was her idea of injecting some gusto into her boss. "You gotta get pumped up, and shake off all those worries!"

"…" Chiaki couldn't respond because her world was spinning like a merry-go-round. Even though Aoi finally stopped, the gamer's head kept bobbing side to side.

"Feeling better yet?"

"I didn't know you could clone yourself, Asahina…"

"That's the spirit!" Aoi hefted the dizzy gamer over her shoulder and marched on. "Let's go relax!"

Even though her division was mostly for agents waiting to be transferred to another division, there were a few that had chosen to stay. One of them was Aoi, a survivor of Junko's killing game, who became friends with Chiaki soon after arrival. Her upbeat attitude and athletic ability were useful and welcome additions to the Thirteenth Division.

"We're here," announced Aoi, putting Chiaki down in a chair. "Wait here while I get us something to drink." The swimmer left while another one of Chiaki's subordinates was present.

"Asahina drag you out again?" asked a young man named Yuuji Minoru. Despite only being nineteen, he was one of the most brilliant hackers and programmers in the Future Foundation. Yuuji always talked in a low tone, as if he was bored. He also had a strange habit of never looking people in the eye. He scratched his messy black hair while drinking the coffee he had.

"Yeah," answered Chiaki, who couldn't help but smile. "Were there any problems today?"

"Everything went without a hitch, as usual."

"Honestly, you should apply for the Seventh Division. Your talent isn't being fully utilized."

"It's comfortable here." He put a hand in his suit pocket. "I know the area well, and it's quiet."

Chiaki could understand the sentiment because she felt the same in regard to her joining the student council. "Still, there would be more benefits and better equipment to work with. If you ever want to do it, I'll personally see the application gets approved."
“I understand. Later, Boss.” The nonchalant man walked away before Aoi took her seat.

“I guess the savior has earned her some loyal subjects,” jokingly said Aoi, handing Chiaki a cup of tea. They were scrupulous not to spill any of the hot liquid. “Why have you been so down in the dumps lately?”

“Well…” Chiaki made a faraway look. “Do you ever feel like you don't have a purpose?”

“Hmm, I'm not sure. Do you think you don't?”

“While I'm a division leader, even before that, I don't really have a goal. I probably won't have any real impact on the Future Foundation, in the end.”

“You can't let that stuff get to you. Sometimes, even if the road is dangerous, you have to continue to walk forward. That's what my best friend helped me see.”

Chiaki knew Aoi was referring to the now deceased Sakura Ogami. She would always talk highly about her when she had the chance. After seeing the mutual killing game, the gamer understood the praise.

“If this doesn't make you feel better, nothing will.”

The swimmer put a white box on the table. Chiaki wondered what was in it but felt ashamed at not guessing when she saw the contents. It turned out to be filled with an assortment of donuts.

“You really do love these,” replied Chiaki, grabbing a glazed donut with pink sprinkles. After taking a bite of the tasty confectionery, the gamer remembered something. “How come you haven't applied to Kirigiri's division? Don't you want to be with your former classmates?”

“It'd be fun to be with them, but I'm fine here. Helping you and new recruits is something I'm decent at. Heh, there's not a lot of things I can do.”

“It was impressive how you overcame Junko.” Chiaki looked down for a moment. “What you all did was amazing.”

“Nah, I was kinda useless and was dumb enough to almost get everyone killed because I couldn’t control my emotions. Naegi and everybody else is the real heroes.” Aoi paused when it looked like she realized something. “Actually… I'd like to think I was a bit more useful than Hagakure.” The duo shared a laugh before Aoi deviously grinned. “Speaking of Kirigiri, I heard something interesting about you and her.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. Rumor is that you two were having… a lover's quarrel.”

Chiaki nearly choked on her tea after hearing that. She pounded her chest and swallowed before responding, “…Huh?”

“Based on what I heard,” began Aoi, putting a hand on her chest and in the air like she was speaking dramatic lines in a play, “Kirigiri aired her grievances until you passionately dispelled them with a powerful statement.” Aoi heartily laughed while the gamer's face glowed red with embarrassment.

“It wasn't like that. She questioned me about what I remembered before I fell into my coma.” Chiaki puffed her cheeks out a little. “She was pretty rude, to be honest.”
"Kirigiri can be like that." Aoi made a softer expression. "She might be hard on the outside—but Kirigiri is nice, in her own way. Think of her like a…cactus."

"She'll poke me if I touch her?"

"Okay, that example sucked. Kirigiri really does try her best to help people; I'm proud to call her one of my closest friends."

Chiaki looked away before taking another bite out of the donut. "You all have become a beacon of hope for society. It would be better for one of you to lead my division."

"Enough of that. If that grumpy vice chairman impeaches you, I'll visit the main headquarters myself and fight against it!"

The gamer laughed at her subordinate's bravado. "I don't think that will go over well."

"You're right… That nasty lady, Ando, would probably get her boyfriend to throw a knife at me or something." The swimmer shuttered at the thought. "Don't forget that your classmates might still be alive out there. They'll need you to help them."

"…I don't think that will happen, Asahina."

The gamer had a melancholic look, which made Aoi think she said something wrong. Just like most, she knew of the cruel torture Chiaki was subjected to. The swimmer had a request but was hesitant because it seemed too insensitive.

"Say, do you mind if I see—" Aoi shook her head. "Never mind."

"You want to see the scars?"

There were a few people who hesitantly asked to see her scars in the past, just like Aoi did. She honestly didn't mind since the marks would always be branded onto her skin. She shifted her bangs, pulled up her sleeves, and partly lifted up her shirt to show the stomach area. "There are others on my legs and foot too."

"Holy…" Aoi put a hand over her mouth in horror. She had seen cruel acts during the killing game, but seeing such scars on her boss was haunting. It was making her stomach churn as she thought of what Chiaki must've endured.

"Ugly, right?"

"No. It makes you look tough."

"It makes me look like a doll that fell into a blender."

"I think it looks cool!" Aoi exclaimed, pumping her fists. "It's like having badges of honor. Plus, don't worry about your friends. I'm sure the Future Foundation will find them."

*That's what I'm afraid of…*

VVV

A girl was helplessly running down a dark corridor with terror in her eyes. Her ragged breaths and footsteps were all she heard. However, for some reason, she felt something horrible would happen if she stopped moving.
It hurts.

She felt a painful sensation on her arm. It was like a sharp knife was slicing through her skin and tendons, right down to the bone.

I want it to stop.

There was a terrible pain in her legs as if they were being slowly sawed off.

Make it stop.

It felt like something was trying to ravage and tear her body from the inside out. Her head throbbed like someone was trying to crack it open with a sledgehammer.

Please make it stop.

"Run…" said a voice that sent fear into her being.

Not wanting to turn around and face the terrifying presence, the girl kept running down the endless corridor. Finally, she reached a door and wasted no time pulling it open. There was nothing but a thick darkness on the other side as the presence was right behind her.

"Run, little rabbit!"

VVV

"Ah!" exclaimed Chiaki, popping her eyes open. She sat up on her bed while wiping the sweat from her forehead. The gamer decided to go without her pills again, thinking the nightmares would finally stop. Sadly, even though the imaginary Junko didn't appear anymore, they were just as potent as ever.

"Junko's dead…" Chiaki said to nobody. "So, why do I—" She jumped when her phone rang before picking it up and answering. "Yes, Ms. Yukizome?"

"I hope I didn't interrupt a pleasant dream. I'm calling to tell you about the helicopter coming."

"…Why?"

"You've been assigned to a mission with two other division leaders. You'll be tasked with the capture of two important targets the Future Foundation has been after."

Chiaki arched a brow. It was rare for her to get an assignment like this out of the blue. "Really?"

"You bet. I told you the others would recognize your talents."

"So, who are the other two division leaders?"

"Well…"

VVV

Chiaki wore a blank face while standing by Kyoko and Juzo. The trio was outside getting ready to depart towards their location. Multiple agents were running around and packing the vehicles full of supplies. Thankfully, since all Future Foundation agents were required to get mandatory shots of a vaccine created by Seiko, the dirty air wouldn't harm them.
"Let's get this over with," said Juzo, wishing the mission would conclude already. He pulled out a file and handed it to Kyoko. Both she and Chiaki looked at its contents. "Our targets are Kitta Takara and a Despair the Future Foundation has labeled Black Rider."

*Kitta Takara,* thought Chiaki. The girl in the Reserve Course attire had dark brown eyes and long pink hair that was wildly spiked up. *This is the friend Junko had that Ms. Yukizome mentioned.*

"Most of Takara's life was spent in the United States with her father, who was the CEO of a multi-billion dollar conglomerate," stated Kyoko, paraphrasing what she had read from Kitta's profile. "Takara came back to Japan to attend Hope's Peak Academy's seventy-eight class of the Reserve Course. It's unclear exactly when she made her turn to despair."

"We don't have much on Black Rider," said Juzo.

Black Rider was wearing a black riding suit with a matching helmet. There didn't seem to be any discernible features.

"The only thing we know is they're likely a female, based on the body. Our job is to investigate the location these two are supposed to be at this afternoon. The top priority is the arrest of Takara and Black Rider. My guys will scan the area, and then you'll be free to investigate if needed, Kirigiri."

"What's my job?" asked Chiaki.

"Do what you want."

Chiaki didn't know what answer she should've expected.

Juzo walked towards the vehicle. "Let's move. You two will be riding with me since this car has the best protection."

There was an odd atmosphere present in the state-of-the-art vehicle. Juzo was driving while Kyoko and Chiaki were told to sit in the back. The lower agents were escorting them with vehicles of their own from in front and behind, ensuring safety on the empty streets. Chiaki happened to look up at a huge billboard that had "Future Foundation Pigs!" spray-painted on it.

"Nanami," began Kyoko, "I trust Yukizome gave you my apology?"

"Yeah," she answered, recalling Chisa casually telling her yesterday. "I'm not angry or anything."

"Heh," laughed Juzo, "does that mean the rumors about you two are true? If you want, I can stop by a restaurant and buy you two a kiddie meal to share."

The boxer continued to enjoy himself while Kyoko looked annoyed. Chiaki could tell the detective had heard the absurd rumors that had been circulating. With this and the whole savior fiasco, the gamer wondered what she did to earn such a reputation. Discarding the thought, she tried to alleviate her boredom by looking out the window.

Hours flew by as the light from streetlamps started to switch on. The heavily clouded Japan sky always made the days seemed much shorter.

On a whim, the gamer decided to ask a question. "Kirigiri, what was Junko like when she was your classmate?"

Kyoko looked at her with impassive eyes. If someone were to ask why Chiaki wanted to know that, she wouldn't have been able to say. The gamer knew the seventy-eight class's memories were
restored, so she figured Kyoko could give her an explanation.

The detective peered out the window again with the artificial lights of the street lamps reflected in it.

"Her sister was more reserved, but Enoshima was open. The whole class took a liking to her quickly because of her charm and fame. We even originally voted for her to be the class representative, but she declined. No matter the situation or individual, she seemed to always know the perfect words to say. So, I would have to say she was a larger-than-life individual."

Chiaki imagined the smiling face of the person she hated the most, talking and hanging out with her classmates like a normal person. Just the thought seemed too ridiculous to have actually been a thing.

"You sure seem to think a lot of her," replied Juzo with a tone of irritation.

"Nanami asked the question, so I answered. As I've told you before, nobody suspected her of anything. She deceived us all through meticulous planning."

The boxer furrowed his brow while his frustration built like it always did when he thought of the blond mastermind who embarrassed him. Then the face of Makoto overcoming the person he couldn't further magnified his anger. "She can't be that tough if a little bitch like Naegi beat her."

Chiaki glanced at Kyoko to see a look of anger after Juzo's snide remark. Her frustration looked passive, but the gamer was still caught off guard by the emotion from the normally composed detective.

"That reminds me, Sakakura. One important facet of being a detective is noticing every detail—no matter how insignificant; this applies to people as well. Even something like the simple twitch of an eye can be valuable in discerning the truth."

"What the hell is your point?"

"While I was at one of our meetings, I noticed a strange reaction you kept having."

"Like what?"

"Tell me... Is there a particular reason you stare at Vice Chairman Munakata so intently?"

Juzo proceeded to make a muffled gasp. Kyoko smiled, and Chiaki had no idea what to make of the situation.

The vehicle was coming up to a four-way intersection before Kyoko spoke again. "Judging by your reaction, I assume my deduction was spot on?"

Juzo took his hands off the wheel and turned his body to face the smirking detective with fury in his eyes. "Look here you fucking—"

That sentence would never be finished because a powerful force slammed into the vehicle, making everyone inside collapse. There was a sound of cracking glass while the vehicle stopped moving. The gamer felt disoriented after the sudden impact. If the vehicle wasn't so nicely made, she realized it could've been a lot worse. She tried to regain her senses but yet another powerful force hit into them which made her head collide with the door, knocking the gamer unconscious.

VVV
"Ugh," grunted the gamer, regaining her consciousness. Despite a skull-splitting headache being present, there didn't seem to be any bleeding. She heard what sounded like gunshots coming from outside.

"Son of a bitch…" said Juzo with a visible wound on his head. "What's going on?"

"It seems we've been ambushed," answered Kyoko, who was grabbing her left arm with a pained expression. "Look."

The detective was staring out the window towards the cars that were escorting them. Future Foundation agents were in a gunfight against a bunch of individuals wearing Monokuma helmets. They were fighting back, but the Despairs had them grossly outnumbered. Upon inspection, it appeared two vehicles hit their car like a pancake.

"There's too many," stated Juzo, trying to start the car. "We need to get outta here and call for backup." The boxer kept trying, but the engine wouldn't cut on. "Dammit!"

Chiaki flinched when a tapping sound was heard on the window next to her. The perpetrators wearing Monokuma helmets were right outside the car. The glass may have been cracked, but it had still not been broken.

"This car is bulletproof," assured Juzo. "Those assholes aren't getting in here."

"I doubt that," countered Kyoko, observing several Despairs jumping on top of the vehicle. Next, they heard the sound of a loud piece a machinery grinding against the roof. A small hole was forming, confirming that a drill was being used. "It won't last a minute!"

Juzo looked in the glove compartment and grabbed a pair of handguns. He tossed one to Kyoko while Chiaki kept her hand on VEIL's touchscreen. The gamer was shaking while holding her breath in anticipation for the clash.

Soon, a hole big enough for a human hand to fit through had been made. A canister with smoke erupting from it was dropped into the vehicle.

"We have to throw—" began Kyoko before losing consciousness.

"D-damn…" muttered Juzo, who was the next pass out.

"This can't be—" The gamer's eyes shut as unconsciousness overtook her, once more.

VVV

This time, when Chiaki woke up, she was greeted with a small room located behind bars. It didn't take long to realize it was a cell. Her mind raced while she wondered where she had been taken.

"You're awake, Chiaki Nanami."

The gamer swiftly turned her head to see a woman wearing a maid outfit and a Monokuma mask.

"…Ms. Yukizome?"

"That is not my identity."

Chiaki pushed off the concrete floor and stood up. The blinking lights above made the whole scene even eerier.
"Where am I?"

"You have been chosen to be a competitor. Welcome to the Despara Carnival."

"Despara Carnival…?"

"Also, there is somebody that would like to meet you…"
This whole situation made for one of the weirdest Chiaki had woken up to discover, which was no easy accomplishment. She was locked in a cell, located in who-knows-where, while a female maid informed her about an event known as the Despara Carnival. Not to mention a mysterious visitor who wanted to see her. The handcuffed gamer wasn't sure what to ask the eerie maid facing her under the blinking lights.

"...Where am I?" Chiaki asked.

"You're in an underground jailing area," answered the maid in a monotone voice. "After being captured, you were brought to this facility."

Chiaki looked down, recalling the ambush. Then her mind went to the associates that were with her. "What did you do with everyone else?"

"Kyoko Kirigiri and Juzo Sakakura have been detained, just like you. As for the lesser Future Foundation agents, I cannot say."

The gamer felt a pang in her chest when she thought of all the agents that were likely dead now. Knowing someone had died trying to protect her from harm was sickening. Chiaki's anger made her attempt to reach for VEIL's control panel, but the handcuffs made it impossible.

"We couldn't remove that device, and we were instructed not to cut off your hand."

Chiaki gulped when she imagined the horror of waking up with her hand gone. VEIL could only be released from her wrist with a code, so it makes sense they couldn't take it off.

"It would've been possible to stitch your hand back, but they were adamant about not touching you."

"...They?"

"One of our leaders—the person who wants to meet you."

Right on cue, some footsteps could be heard approaching. Chiaki hadn't stopped to think about it, but the entire area had been dead silent until now.

"He's arrived."

The footsteps kept slowly approaching, like a stereotypical killer in a horror movie. Chiaki began to feel even tenser while her anticipation kept escalating. If this person wanted to see her, there could be a chance it wasn't a stranger. If it turned out to be one of her reformed classmates, she wouldn't know what reaction to expect from them or herself.

Finally, her visitor stopped in front of her cell. The reaction Chiaki had upon seeing this individual was even stronger than when she saw Chisa after awakening from her coma. The gamer felt like her heart stopped, momentarily. In front of her, was the face she grew to hate unconditionally; a face she recognized as the bane of humanity.
"Junko!" exclaimed Chiaki, backing up so suddenly that she lost her footing. She backed against the wall and shielded her eyes. The gamer had no desire to look at the face of the one who ruined her life. Instead of an intense anger, an indescribable fear pierced her very being.

"That will be all," stated a rigid, ominous male voice that made Chiaki pause.

"Yes, sir," replied the unusual maid, departing soon after.

Chiaki was initially so startled, she failed to notice some other key features about the visitor. They were adorned in a heavy black trench coat with matching pants and boots. They were also wearing a white scarf and gloves. It was hard to tell because of all the clothing, but the stranger looked relatively skinny. The absolute strangest feature was the headpiece this person was wearing.

"Is that…a helmet of Junko?"

In her fright, she didn't notice that Junko's head was too big, and it was motionless. It turned out the individual in front of her was wearing a helmet designed in the image of Junko's head. It depicted the deceased mastermind winking and sticking out her tongue in a cocky manner. Chiaki started to wonder what odd development would happen next.

"Does the face of Junko Enoshima scare you?"

Chiaki assumed it was a guy because of the figure and voice. She couldn't remember any description or picture of this person from the briefing. The man was, unquestioningly, making her feel uncomfortable. She thought it could be that her nerves were still on edge from the earlier misunderstanding and the precarious situation.

But that wasn't it.

There was something about this person that made her want to turn away. Despite her plight—she was a prisoner, and she knew from experience that testing someone in despair was more trouble than it's worth.

"It's not a face I want to remember."

"Considering your case, that's an understandable stance, Chiaki Nanami. It was Junko's exploitation of the Reserve Course that led to your torture."

_He thinks that…? "…How do you know about me?"

"Obtaining information about Future Foundation employees is within my capability."

The personal records of employees were, normally, never made public. They were always protected by highly encrypted servers, fastidious anti-hacker measures, and the counter-espionage branch. There was only one way Chiaki thought it could be possible.

_If someone was giving him information from the inside..._ The smirking face of Chisa crossed her mind.

"Wouldn't you like to know why I wanted to meet you? Truthfully, it's a trivial reason. I simply wanted to lay my eyes on the savior."

_He knows about that too?_ Her nickname was known throughout the organization, but it wasn't something attached to her records. Chiaki didn't rule it out, but she was sure her being called the savior wasn't known publicly.
"The savior herself… It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I'm not the savior."

"Maybe, all you need is the opportunity to prove yourself."

"If you really want to meet a real savior, you should've talked to Naegi or Kirigiri. They're the ones who defeated Junko and triggered the decline of despair. I had no part in it."

"Regardless, I've taken an interest in you. I look forward to seeing what actions you'll take."

It was hard to tell how serious this guy was because he constantly maintained the same tone. Why this person would be so fascinated by her was hard to see. All Chiaki knew is this person made her feel anxious. She still couldn't pinpoint the reason, but being near this person felt like a miasma was building in her body.

"Have we… met before?"

"If you had to guess—who do you think I am?"

Chiaki didn't know how to answer the out-of-the-blue question. This man made her hairs stand, and his aura felt disparate. If this person wasn't a stranger, there is one name that came to her. She doubted it was right but spoke the name anyway. "…Izuru Kamakura?"

"Interesting."

Instead of a definitive answer, the man walked away from the cell. Despite the relief of having his ghastly presence leave, the gamer walked to the bars and asked, "Who are you?"

"Surely, you understand the paradox of asking the identity of someone hiding their identity?"

Chiaki gave no answer while she continued to stare at the man's back.

"How about… Enigma. Call me that if you like."

Enigma departed with the same steady pace that he entered with. Chiaki proceeded to plop down on the floor and stare at the ceiling.

"Where do these people come from…?"

Chiaki sat in silence for an unknown period of time. She had to stay by the bars because being in a confined space like this was starting to get to her. Even though this was a prison, it remained awfully silent. The gamer assumed she had been secluded away from other prisoners. Having nothing else to do, she played with her bangs until she noticed something unique about her hair.

Is it… white?

Upon looking at the strands of her hair above her right eye in the past, she noticed how this part of her hair was a slightly different shade from the rest. Chiaki didn't stare at herself in the mirror much, so she never noticed how this part of her hair had become more distinctive. After ignoring the strands, she heard another person.

"Ugh," grunted a familiar voice.

"Is that you, Kirigiri?"
"Nanami?" Kyoko sounded like she was in the cell adjacent to her. Judging by the sound, the detective seemed like she was in pain.

"Did they hurt you?"

"When we were attacked, I hurt my left arm." The gamer heard Kyoko take a deep breath. "You wouldn't happen to know our current location, would you?"

"There was a weird maid that said we were being held in a jailing area. She also said we'd be competitors in something called the Despara Carnival."

"So, that's what this is…"

"You know about it?"

"For months, there's been a traveling convoy of Despairs that hold an event called the Despara Carnival wherever they go. The name might sound grandiose, but it's basically a group of killers slaying people in front of an audience. Someone has deceived us."

"What makes you say that?"

"Think about our situation. Despite the measures we took to ensure privacy, the Despairs knew exactly how and where to hit us. Also, it should be noted that someone who's affiliated with the Despara Carnival is, in fact, Kittata Takara."

Just like earlier, only one potential perpetrator emerged in Chiaki's head. It was the face of someone who handled important information, who has expressed interest in Kittata and told her about the mission in the first place. She assumed all these unfortunate events were bad luck, but Chiaki realized these circumstances might've been influenced from the start.

"It must've been someone who knew about our task ahead of time."

"…Who do you think it could be?"

"I have a hunch, but I can't say for certain right now. Whatever answer I reach will be meaningless if we don't survive. Did that maid tell you anything else?"

"No, but there was another person. It was some guy wearing a helmet in the shape of Junko's head. I think he's supposed to be one of their leaders."

"I don't know of any Despairs like that. What did he say?"

Chiaki was about to inform the detective of Enigma's interest in her, but she stopped. If her inkling was right, all of this could be related to herself. The last thing she wanted Kyoko to know was someone who might've set-up the ambush was after her.

"He just kept saying cryptic stuff I didn't understand. When I asked for his name, he called himself Enigma."

"Enigma…? What else did you notice about him?"

"Well, I'm not sure how to explain, but it felt weird being close to him. It's like there was something about his presence that makes him menacing. He's a dangerous person, I believe."

"I see. I wonder how much clout this person has among the Despairs. It's interesting how Enigma has avoided the detection of the Future Foundation. He might be new, or he could've even been in
hiding until now. There could be a chance he's one of the Remnants of Despair. Fascinating…”

"Heh," chuckled Chiaki under her breath.

The enthusiasm Kyoko had when talking about these things reminded her of how starry-eyed Sonia was when discussing serial killers. If the former Ultimate Princess met the detective, the gamer had no doubt she would've taken an immediate liking to Kyoko.

"What's amusing?"

"I had an old friend that was fascinated by this stuff; you would've been good friends, I think."

"Is that so?"

Chiaki thought about her class with fondness before the tragedy of what followed set in. She looked up at the ceiling with blank eyes. "We're probably going to be killed, aren't we, Kirigiri?" she said.

"It's likely. I've seen pictures of murdered victims as a result of this event that is horrific beyond words. We've been imprisoned in an unknown location, and they've confiscated our phones."

"VEIL's amazing, but I really wish it could make a phone call." Chiaki was surprised when that comment earned a small laugh from Kyoko.

"That would be convenient at the moment. The only hope we have is a distress signal that comes equipped with the Future Foundation vehicles. If we haven't been found already, I don't think we can put too much stock on backup coming to our rescue. You haven't seen Sakakura, have you?"

"I haven't."

"Hopefully, he's still unconscious somewhere. It should be safe to assume the division leaders were only supposed to be captured. Until something else develops, we have no choice but to wait."

"Speaking of Sakakura," began Chiaki, remembering the rage Kyoko received from the boxer, "why did he get so mad about what you said?"

There was a pause before the reply came. "Maybe you'll find out one day."

The conversation stopped after that. Chiaki hugged her knees and imagined she was playing a game, which wasn't possible since her Game Girl Ultra had been confiscated, but that did little to amend the anxiety she was feeling. Being imprisoned so she could be given to a bunch of killers made it impossible to relax. The gamer felt embarrassed, but she decided to ask for a request from Kyoko.

"Kirigiri?"

"Yes?"

"...Do you mind if we make small talk?"

Chiaki felt a bit of shame. She was a grown woman, but she felt like a little girl asking for a nightlight in fear of the dark. She was about to tell Kyoko to forget about it, but the detective spoke before she could.

"Alright."
"Really?"

"This environment is hard to be in, right? With our looming ordeal and the experience of being confined somewhere with no way out—I'm rather tense myself. What do you want to talk about?"

Chiaki was relieved when someone like Kyoko felt jittery too. It gave a sense of validation for her own worries, which might've been bad in the grand scope of things.

Neither one of them discussed anything too personal. Chiaki would just go on about work or memories of school, and Kyoko followed suit with her own experiences. Despite the two not having much of a relationship previous to this, their conversation was a small warmth in this bleak predicament.

"You speak kindly about Naegi," stated Chiaki. "Were you two close friends in school?"

"Not really. I was…busy most of the time. He'd spend most of his time with Maizono or the others."

"Still, from what I could tell from the killing game, I think you two really trust each other."

"…During the game, there was a time I had to trust him with my life. He believed me until the end, and it almost cost him his life."

The gamer smiled at the kind relationship between the two. Then, without meaning to, she thought of someone she trusted. It was someone she really wanted to have trusted her in return. She saw his face for a moment before gazing down.

"…Hold on to that trust, Kirigiri."

"Hmm?"

Kyoko seemed like she wanted to pry further, but didn't because it sounded as if a taboo subject had appeared. Instead, the duo remained quiet for a few minutes until some new sounds were heard.

"Do you hear that?" asked Chiaki, feeling her dread return.

"Footsteps…and it's not just one person."

Within seconds, multiple Despairs appeared outside both division leaders' cells. Chiaki knew struggling was futile because she was outnumbered, and using VEIL wasn't conceivable at the moment. After unlocking the cell door, two Despairs roughly grabbed her arms and pulled her along with Kyoko in tow. The gamer looked back to see Kyoko was visibly in agony from a Despair squeezing her injured arm.

"Her arm is hurt!" stated Chiaki. The response was a rough push to her back.

The two captive division leaders were, begrudgingly, led up a long set of stairs. There was faint noise that grew louder while they ascended. It sounded like a riot was going on.

"Originally," began Kyoko with a grim look, "I thought we were here to await transport to another location. It seems that's not the case."

"Where are we?" asked Chiaki, whose heart was pounding while a huge entrance way was visible.

"We're under an arena."
Chiaki's mouth opened as she saw a humongous stadium filled with people screaming at the top of their lungs under a dark sky. It was clear everyone in the stands were Despairs because of the attires they all wore. Bright lights shined down on the horde of handcuffed people, who were probably more hostages. All of them looked to be innocent civilians consisting of males and females of different ages. Both Chiaki and Kyoko were pushed to the front of the other prisoners where someone they knew was hunched over on the ground.

"Sakakura!" announced Chiaki. He had bruising all over his body, indicating he was beaten up. 

"What happened to you?" asked Kyoko.

"Let's just say I didn't make it easy for these bastards to get me up here." Juzo proceeded to spit out blood. "What is all this?"

"It's the—" Kyoko stopped when smoke billowed from a giant stage in front of them. In response, the crowd grew even rowdier.

Finally, the figures of three individuals appeared.

"Hello, one and all!" yelled a woman with hot-pink hair that was wildly spiked up, into a microphone. "It's your beautiful, beloved, and majestic idol of this despair-ridden world…Kitta Takara!" The crowd chanted Kitta's name as if they worshiped her.

So, that's her, thought Chiaki.

Her long hair draped down, and she had a lot of eyeliner on. Kitta wore a black and white sleeveless top, along with a white skirt on top of black tights. Her white stilettos made her look like a mixture of a model and a punk rock fan. She also wore bracelets and earrings that were shaped like Monokuma.

"It's her!" exclaimed Juzo.

What the boxer was referring to was the woman in the black riding suit standing next to Kitta. She stood completely still as if she was made of stone. Plus, there was another person of interest on the other side of Kitta. It was the ominous guy know as Enigma, who quietly observed the spectacle.

"I take it that's Enigma, Nanami?"

"That's him."

"I don't know him," stated Juzo with his fury building upon looking at the headgear of Junko's teasing face, "but he has some nerve wearing that piece of shit in front of me!"

"Welcome to the Despara Carnival!" energetically announced Kitta. "Tonight, we have special guests joining us from the Future Foundation!" There was loud boooing and obscene language shouted at the uttering of the anti-despair organization. "We have the former Ultimate Boxer, Juzo Sakakura! Next, is the former Ultimate Detective, Kyoko Kirigiri! Lastly—"

Suddenly, the cheerful and charming look Kitta had vanished for a second when she gazed down at Chiaki. The gamer felt a chill when Kitta's cold and hateful gaze fell on her. It was like her existence was disgusting to the idol or, rather, she looked down on those opposed to her.

"What the hell was her name again?" whispered Kitta to Enigma. After Enigma told her about Chiaki's identity, she laughed under her breath before announcing, "Lastly, we have the former Ultimate Gamer…and savior of the Future Foundation, Chiaki Nanami!"
"I wonder how they knew about that… Kyoko glanced at Chiaki while the crowd laughed at her title of savior.

"We're running a bit late tonight folks, so let's get to it! Bring in the contestants!"

At some large doors on the side of the arena, many figures walked into view to a ravenous cheering. Chiaki had no idea whom to keep her attention on. The most intimidating array of human beings she had ever seen lined up in front of the stage. Many had tattoos covering their bodies and face paint. They all were holding weapons like axes, knives, and even hammers. Some had eerie, blank expression while others had sinister smiles and a ruthless look in their eyes.

"Unbelievable…" muttered Kyoko with her eyes showing astonishment.

"Do you know these people?" asked Chiaki.

"They're all infamous serial killers. Victor the Silencer used to be a Russian soldier that pulls out his victim's tongue with pliers and wears them around his neck. Annabelle Watson was an elementary school teacher who mutilated many young children in various ways. Santiago Rivera has been compared to Jack the Ripper for the gruesome murders he commits with weapons. In terms of serial killers with Spanish origins, his number of kills are even larger than Sparkling Justice."

"Now, without further ado…let's—" Before Kitta could finish her announcement, Enigma leaned over and told her something.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" snarled Kitta, pulling the mic away from her. "Why would I do that?" With a disgruntled face, the idol looked straight at Enigma. When he gave no response, she rolled her eyes. She put her "charming" face back on before announcing, "I have a special announcement! In order to make this more exciting, Chiaki Nanami will compete with her hands unbound! Let's see if the savior can take advantage of this special perk!"

"Huh?" said a perplexed Chiaki.

There was confusion among the hostages when a Despair took off Chiaki's handcuffs. She felt instant relief on her wrists from having them released. More importantly, she could now utilize VEIL however she wanted.

But why only her? thought Kyoko. Apropos Enigma's apparent intent in Chiaki, Kyoko observed him. From what I witnessed, he gave the suggestion to free Nanami.

"Finally," announced Kitta, pointing her hand towards the sky, "the extreme, blood-curdling, despair-inducing event is about to start! Now, commence the killing!"

Too many things happened at once upon the declaration to start this insidious event. The hostages behind her scattered and screamed in pure horror. The crowd grew even louder and more raucous than ever before. The quick and sudden shift into pandemonium was utterly disorienting. To top it all off, Chiaki stood with her hand on VEIL, not knowing what to do while the skilled killers approached their prey.

As incredible as VEIL was, it was most effective in one-on-one situations. Against a horde of people like this, she was at a disadvantage. Still, despite her shaking, Chiaki stood her ground to intercept as many as she could in an effort to protect those behind her. Even knowing she wasn't proficient enough to stop a bunch of experienced killers, the gamer knew she was the best defense.

"Move!" yelled Kyoko, who pulled Chiaki away before shoving her aside.
Chiaki hit the ground with a thud, not seeing what happened to Kyoko after being shoved. Before she could get up, her eyes saw a sharp object about to come down. She grabbed the wrist of the attacker right before a blade could pierce her skull. She looked at a woman, whose face was mostly covered by long, messy black hair. If Kyoko was correct, this woman’s identity was Annabelle Watson.

"I normally only cut up young ones," began Annabelle with insane eyes being shown behind her hair. "but I can make an exception."

"Get off!" The gamer brought her right wrist to her left hand so she could reach VEIL's touchscreen. After successfully entering the code, she pointed her right palm at Annabelle before an invisible pulse shot out. The woman was blown back while Chiaki scrambled to her feet and started running.

Chiaki kept getting bumped and shoved by random prisoners moving around in a frenzy. It was so hectic, she couldn't pinpoint Kyoko or Juzo's whereabouts. The gamer happened to look at the scene of Victor the Silencer pinning a young woman to the ground before forcibly putting rusty pliers in her mouth. One might've found censure in Chiaki's choice to turn away from the scene, but her stomach wouldn't allow her to view such a barbaric and primal sight.

Perhaps, in an ironic way, her seeing the violent scene was a good thing because her turning around so quickly allowed the gamer to dodge a blade that flew past. She lost her balance before a large man in a mask stood over her with an ax in hand. Chiaki was sure her life would end there, but a random elderly man tackled the assailant. The frail old man could barely make the masked individual budge; however, it let the gamer activate VEIL's taser function. She buried her electrified palm in his chest, sending him to the ground.

"Are you alright?" asked the old man.

"Yes. Thank you for—"

The old man's face convulsed to one of pure terror before he collapsed on the ground. Chiaki looked on in horror as a lance was protruding from his back. She saw the culprit a few meters away, staring at her while licking his lips. The gamer wasted no time running in the opposite direction. She never even turned her head any other direction but straight.

She drifted through the parade of discord and death until she hit the arena's wall. Chiaki backed up against it and fell to her knees while a familiar sense of helplessness consumed her.

"Ha, so much for the savior!" mockingly announced Kitta. "At the rate this is going, folks, it might be the quickest Despara Carnival yet!"

What can I do…? thought Chiaki, grabbing her head in disarray. Even with VEIL, I can't stop them. There's just too many. She covered her ears as the gruesome sound of death was too much to bear. What can I—

Chiaki's eyes widened as she thought of something. She recalled there was another method available to her. It wasn't VEIL, but another object in her possession. It was an item handed to her by Chisa a few months back. The gamer, hoping it wasn't confiscated, reached into one of her boots and grabbed a rectangular case. After opening it, two syringes entered her vision.

"…"

Chiaki grabbed one of the syringes and pondered if what she was about to do was the best action.
If this went badly, she could do irreparable damage to her body. Nevertheless, whatever caution she had was thrown out the window when the disgusting scene that was the Despara Carnival continued to play out in front of her. The gamer knew if she didn't do something, it would truly be game over this time. She held onto her convictions and pulled her sleeve back before pointing the needle at her exposed skin.

*Here goes nothing…I think…*

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

1. In case you were wondering, Kitta is an original character I made. This won't be a habit, but there's a reason I had to make her. The reason is...something I can't say because it would spoil you.
"Syringes?" asked Chiaki, opening a plastic case the smiling Chisa handed her. She had been busy with paperwork when Chisa walked in and handed her a case that contained two syringes. At this time, the mutual killing game had transpired a month ago.

"Yep," began Chisa, "those contain a special performance enhancer Kimura concocted. I managed to get my hands on two syringes full of the stuff."

Chiaki looked at Chisa's "gift" with a lack of optimism. She wasn't a big fan of sharp objects, let alone mysterious substances given to her by a despair-crazed individual. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Simple." Chisa rolled up one of her sleeves. "Just take a syringe, inject it in your arm, and wait for the magic to happen. You know how that guy who wears red and jumps turns invincible after getting a shiny star? Think of it like that, if it helps."

"I really hope this doesn't destroy my body..."

"You might experience some...aftereffects, but it won't kill you. Make sure to take one at a time, and only use it when you absolutely must. Getting those syringes was difficult, even for me. That's all I wanted to discuss with you, sweetie."

Chiaki still had something she wanted to ask, but the housekeeper looked as if she was done speaking. Her sudden departure was most likely to bypass any further questioning.

"Also, make sure no one catches you with that. It'd be troublesome if you were caught stealing drugs."

The gamer narrowed her eyes and sighed in exasperation while Chisa's antics never failed to stress her out. She was starting to believe her former teacher could always be this manipulative, and the despair just made her embrace that side more. Nonetheless, Chiaki looked at the two syringes and quietly hoped the need to use them would never appear.

VVV

"This has turned into absolute domination!" yelled Kitta into the mic, overlooking the rambunctious crowd and the chaotic scramble of hostages and killers. "A little more than half the hostages remain, and the contestants have been doing as they please! Looks like it's gonna be a full rout for the side of despair!"

Kitta pleasantly took in the wave of applause and cheering before smiling and turning to Enigma.

"Honestly, why did you want that phony savior to go unbound? She's just running around in terror and failed to make this any more interesting. If I knew it would be this pitiful, I would've had Sakakura set free instead."

"The Despara Carnival hasn't concluded yet. The tide of this event could change at any time."

"Haha, as if! The only thing I'm worried about is how my faithful fanbase will get a little bored of the Despara Carnival always being so lopsided. Maybe I should invest in killer robots?" A smile crossed the ringleader's face when she realized something funny. "Why are you so fascinated in Nanami? Can it be...the gamer dweeb has stolen your heart?"
The lack of a response annoyed Kitta. "You really need to get a sense of humor one of these days and stop being so serious. What I just said was obviously funny, right, Black Rider?"

The woman in the riding outfit didn't make a sound.

"Ugh, as usual, you guys are the worst company a girl could ask for. How you two managed to get into Junko's good books, I'll never know."

Meanwhile, the hostages below were doing whatever they could to survive the hellish event. Some ran around while hoping rescuers would come to their salvation. Others tried to resist, which was an effort in futility against experienced killers. A few pleaded for mercy, but their desperate cries fell on deaf ears. It didn't take long for pure despair to set in, and they all began to pray that a quick and painless death would come.

On the far side of the arena, leaning against the wall was Chiaki with a syringe in her hand. If I don't do something...everyone will die... She kept thinking this in her head. The needle was touching her skin, but her arm would not move any further. The gamer felt bad she was hesitating, but injecting herself with a drug given to her by Chisa seemed overly hazardous.

"Ah!" shouted a young boy, about to be attacked by a tall man wearing a clown outfit. One could imagine what unsavory things were about to transpire.

Chiaki, seeing the scene, took a deep breath and slapped her cheeks hard enough for red marks to appear on her face. I don't know what Ms. Yukizome wants, but I don't think she'd hand me poison. I can't let everyone suffer because I made a bad decision again!

The image of a sharp needle penetrating her skin nearly made her hesitate again, but she shook it off and plunged it into her arm before injecting the substance into her body. Almost immediately, she was overtaken by a bunch of overwhelming sensations. Her limbs went numb, her blood felt like it was on fire, and her heart began beating fast enough to feel as if it would explode out of her chest.

However, after a few seconds, the strong sensation stopped and was replaced by a new one. What's happening...?

The gamer stood up and looked around. If someone asked her to describe what she was feeling, the best explanation Chiaki could give is her perception of reality had changed in a few ways: her ears could perceive things more accurately, her eyesight had improved tremendously, and her body felt light enough to start floating. Even with all the hectic action happening at once, everything seemed to be moving slower and more vividly.

Just a few meters away was the child killer, Annabelle Watson, stalking the field. The earlier damage she took from the gamer's weapon was fresh in her demented mind. She tightened the grip on her knife and ran towards Chiaki with a hungry expression. Her target was staring off blankly, so Annabelle assumed this would be easy revenge. Despite that, after the demented woman lunged at her—the gamer side-stepped, activated VEIL's taser and planted her electrified palm on the child killer's back. She could barely follow what happened while her paralyzed body landed on the earth.

Not wasting a beat, Chiaki dashed across the area towards the murderous clown. The gamer was moving with agility she didn't think was possible for her. She closed the distance within seconds and easily paralyzed the clown before he knew what hit him. She looked at the distance she covered and couldn't believe how quickly it occurred.
Right now—she felt like nothing could stop her.

*This is incredible! It really is like a power-up from a game.* She stopped her admiration of the performance enhancer and went to engage more of the killers.

"What the…" muttered Kitta, who witnessed how Chiaki took down two of her contestants.

"She has found some reserves of fervor, it seems," stated Enigma. "This could be troublesome."

Kitta twitched her eye in frustration. "Don't be foolish. It just one last push of desperation because she knows how hopeless it is. There's no way that phony savior can keep this up."

Chiaki ran into the heart of the pandemonium while taking out any opposition in the way. A huge man with a sledgehammer aimed at her, but she stylishly vaulted over him while connecting VEIL on his shoulder.

Within seconds, a woman with razor sharp claws tried to slash at her from behind. The gamer caught the assailant's arm and slammed her to the ground.

It feels like I can do anything! thought Chiaki who still couldn't believe how potent Seiko's drug was. She felt confident enough to believe she'd give Akane and Nekomaru a run for their money.

Chiaki's eyes darted around, searching for anything that might come next. She found her answer in the form of a lance rapidly flying at her. The gamer tilted her head to the side before grabbing the weapon out of the air before it passed her. The culprit was the guy from earlier who killed the old man. Instead of the sinister expression he had before, he looked as if a monster appeared before him.

_How is this happening…?_ thought Kitta, not believing what she saw. _She was running for her life a few minutes ago…and now she's turned into an android?_

"It seems like the tide has shifted, Takara," commented Enigma.

"I thought you said she was the former Ultimate Gamer! How the hell is she doing all this!"

"Perhaps, the Future Foundation shapes their agents better than we assumed. Or…she could be someone you've underestimated. I'm sure the obvious humor of such a thing isn't lost on you?"

A vein popped out of the idol's head as she glared at him. "Don't screw with me, freak. If it wasn't for Junko, I wouldn't bother with you."

Kitta turned away from him and faced the microphone again before announcing, "To make things even spicier, I'm creating an incentive! Whoever brings me the dead body of the phony savior gets all the glory!"

After the declaration by Kitta was announced, all of the attention was centered on Chiaki. While the gamer still felt confident she could hold her own, having them all come at her at once might be too much to handle without getting seriously injured.

"Nanami!" yelled a male voice in the distance.

Chiaki looked around until she spotted the source, which turned out to be Juzo. He looked like he was in worse shape than earlier, but he was still standing and didn't have any major looking injuries. The boxer stuck his handcuffs in the air once their gazes met. The gamer understood what he wanted from her.
She ran to his position while dodging any murderous obstacle in the way. When she was close enough, she jumped on someone's shoulder and boosted herself high in the air. She entered a code on VEIL's touchscreen, making it turn into a glove covered in a strong alloy. If Sonosuke's notes were accurate, the alloy was stronger than brass knuckles and could shatter blades. She used her strength and momentum of the fall on Juzo's handcuffs, breaking them.

"Damn right!" yelled Juzo, who felt ecstatic to have his precious and lethal hands unbound. He wasted no time throwing a right to the approaching former Russian soldier, Victor the Silencer. His blow connected, making the killer hit the ground with a dislocated jaw.

At the same time, Chiaki was still crouching on the ground when the Hispanic killer, Santiago Rivera, loomed over her with his chainsaw. Before he could bring it down, Chiaki balled her armored fist and connected with a vicious uppercut she learned from a fighting game. She saw a tooth fall out of his mouth before colliding with the dirt.

"Sweet uppercut," complemented Juzo, which was extremely uncommon.

"It's not the first time I've knocked somebody out with that move, actually."

"What the hell is wrong with all of you!" yelled Kitta, who was losing her nerves. "Just attack them at the same time!"

Despite Kitta's enraged call of attack, none of the remaining contestants made a move towards Juzo and Chiaki. Witnessing the former Ultimate Gamer incapacitate several infamous killers was sobering enough, but having the best boxer on Earth standing beside her made them all second guess themselves. The ringleader watched in dismay because her competitors refused to engage.

"Since when have you been this good in a fight?" asked Juzo.

"..." Chiaki opted to stare at the opposition while maintaining her silence.

"... Guess it doesn't really matter. In the meantime..." Juzo breathed in while cuffing his hands around his mouth. "Listen up, hostages! We have the remaining killers on the ropes, and we heavily outnumber them! If you want to live—pick up a weapon and fight these bastards!"

The hostages all looked at each other with indecisiveness. Even with the numbers, they were still up against a bunch of violent murderers in a hostile environment. Regardless, they began to shove aside their fear and march towards the opportunity of survival. They picked up any weapon off the ground before charging at the contestants, all at once. The competitors became overwhelmed as a result of the rebellion.

"It seems things are swaying our way," stated Kyoko, who seemed to appear out of nowhere. She had some small scratches, but the detective was mostly unharmed—with the exception of her injured arm. "Still, we're surrounded by an arena full of Despairs."

"Then, we just need to fight our way through and look for our phones to call for back-up," informed Juzo before staring at the trio standing on the stage. "We're taking those three down."

"Damn you..." muttered Kitta with an expression full of malignity. Her audience was booing in anger, and her candidates were being defeated. The ringleader blamed all the turmoil on the woman she was staring daggers at. "Damn you...Chiaki Nanami..."

She heard the phone in her pocket ring. Kitta hastily grabbed it and answered the call. The news she heard on the other end was less than favorable. Her eye twitched in frustration again because it seemed like someone was pulling a cruel joke on her.
"What else can go wrong!" she screamed, hanging up the phone. Kitta pulled the mic to her and said, "This is an emergency announcement! Future Foundation units will converge on this place within minutes! Evacuate at once!"

*Did they find us?* Kyoko observing the crowd turn into a frenzy while they all were escaping.

"Black Rider," began Kitta, "get me out of here."

"Where will you go?" asked Enigma.

"I'm heading to Junko's castle, of course. The helicopter is on its way as we speak. Are you coming?"

"I have my own business to take care of; we'll part ways for the time being."

"Tch, whatever. If they arrest you—you're on your own." Kitta and Black Rider proceeded to flee.

"Go after them!" commanded Juzo towards Chiaki and Kyoko. "Arrest both of them if you can, but the priority is Takara!"

"Right," agreed Kyoko while Chiaki followed suit. "If you wouldn't mind, Nanami." The detective held out her restrained hands before Chiaki shattered the bindings.

The duo broke into a sprint in pursuit of their targets. As this happened, Chiaki glanced at Enigma for a second to see him glancing at her. The uncomfortable feeling he gave her was still present, but she ignored it and continued running.

Two Despairs armed with guns stood in their way, which Kitta likely ordered. Chiaki activated VEIL's barrier, deflecting the bullets, before electrocuting one and kicking the other in the gut. She did it so smoothly, Kyoko never had to stop running.

"The ability you've shown is unexpected," commented Kyoko.

"…I've taken a lot of vitamins."

"I don't know why you stayed," began Juzo, cracking his knuckles while he approached Enigma on the stage, "but I'm taking you in. I should give you a heads up…I don't know if I can hold back when you're wearing a helmet of that bitch."

Enigma dug into his coat pocket and pulled out a small switchblade. He brandished it in front of the boxer.

"You must be a dumbass if you think I'll lose in close combat. I'll make this fast!" Juzo charged at the masked man.

VVV

"There they go!" announced Chiaki, spotting Black Rider and Kitta riding out of the parking lot on a motorcycle. "How are we going to—"

"Here!" interrupted Kyoko, opening the door of an empty car. "Someone left the keys in. Can you drive?"

"I'm great at driving!"

"You take the wheel since you're in better shape."
Chiaki jumped in the driver's seat while Kyoko sat on the passenger's side. The gamer took a deep breath before putting her hands on the wheel and pressing her foot on the gas pedal. However, nothing happened. She tried again, and the same result occurred.

"I think the car is broken, Kirigiri."

"…Try turning the key."

"Huh?" It turned out the car was still off. The gamer turned the key in the ignition until the sound of the engine could be heard. "That's weird. The cars I've used start when you close the door. Here we go!" It was her intention to back up, but the car drove forward into a pole.

"Put it in reverse."

"Oh, my mistake. There's usually a different button for that." Chiaki did as told and put the car in reverse. She backed up quickly before roughly slamming on the brakes.

"Nanami…how many times have you driven before?"

"I've driven all around the world with hundreds of different cars. I'm really good at most racing games. I don't think there was one I was bad at, really."

"Have you ever driven in real life?"

"No, but I'm sure it can't be that different."

The former Ultimate Detective felt a chill run through her body when she realized the situation she was in. "I think it would be best if I take the—" Kyoko lost her chance when Chiaki smashed her foot on the gas pedal, which made the car shoot out of the parking lot like a bullet.

"What's the button for the nitrous, Kirigiri?"

"…There is no nitrous oxide equipped with this vehicle."

"Aww, the owner really needs to upgrade their car if they want to win any races or escape from the cops."

Kyoko opted not to respond while she put her seat belt on and internally thanked the fact there was no traffic on the street.

The dark sky had started to get brighter, which meant it was around dawn. It turned out the ambush, incarceration, and Despara Carnival had lasted an entire night. Kyoko was keeping an eye out for Black Rider's motorcycle while giving Chiaki tips for better driving. She had hit a newsstand, drove on the wrong side of the road, and turned the car so sharply they almost flipped over…but she seemed to be getting the hang of it.

They were driving around for a few minutes before Kyoko spotted something in the sky, near a tall building. "Look there!" announced Kyoko, pointing it out to Chiaki. A helicopter was hovering outside the roof of a building with its ladder extended. "It seems like they aren't going to land. Take us there, Nanami."

"Okay!" While keeping an eye on the helicopter, Chiaki navigated through the streets. If she was unsure, Kyoko would quickly tell her where to turn. The destination could be seen at the end of a long, straight road. Also, in the distance, Black Rider and Kitta were visible.
"They've beaten us here by a good margin. I'll give you the tracking device."

"What tracking—"

Chiaki stopped her sentence when she witnessed Kyoko remove one of her gloves. It wasn't the act of her taking off the glove that caught the gamer's attention—but the hand underneath. Only questions appeared when she saw the condition of the detective's hand. She realized her other might be the same.

"They're not as bad as yours…but I, too, have my scars." Kyoko reached into her glove and grabbed a small object concealed inside of a tiny pocket. It looked like a silver chip. "They didn't take it."

"That's the tracking device?"

"Since you're better suited, I need you to discreetly stick this on that helicopter."

"Weren't we ordered to arrest Takara and Black Rider?"

"This method might lead us to something more valuable. If it fails, I'll take full responsibility for it."

"What if I get stuck in the air?"

"Just jump down, and I should be able to let you safely land with another piece of technology in my other glove."

"But…what if I'm forced to drop somewhere you won't be able to get to?"

Kyoko closed her eyes for a moment before uttering, "I understand what I'm asking of you. Your life will be put in danger because I'm altering Sakakura's orders—all I can ask is that you trust me."

"I'll do it."

Kyoko widened her eyes at that quick response.

It could've been the detective was growing on her or the boost in confidence the performance enhancer provided, but Chiaki felt sure in her choice to follow Kyoko's request. "I'll trust you, Kirigiri."

Kyoko smiled a bit before facing forward again. "Thanks."

Their targets had arrived at the building with the helicopter above it. Kitta had already jumped off and ran up the structure while Black Rider rode off somewhere else.

The two division leaders finally arrived seconds later while Chiaki announced, "Black Rider is getting away!"

"The priority is the helicopter!"

Chiaki nodded and grabbed the tracking device. "Will you be able to drive with one arm?"

"I'll be fine."

The gamer proceeded to jump out of the car and run into the building.
"Damn it…” grunted Juzo while collapsing.

He lied on the ground frustrated—refusing to believe what had just transpired. During his fight with Enigma, the boxer suffered multiple cuts across his entire body. He was unable to land a single blow on the masked man. The thought of the former Ultimate Boxer never landing a blow and being harshly injured in a close range fight was inconceivable.

"You did make that fast," stated Enigma, putting the switchblade back in his pocket. "You failed to last long enough for your back-up to arrive. How unbecoming of the former Ultimate Boxer."

The boxer clenched his teeth while Enigma turned his back on him and walked off. Watching his opponent leave him in defeat was all too familiar to that rainy day long ago. The one who defeated him while wearing the mask of the woman he despised did the opposite of mitigating his fury.

"Wait! Just…what the hell are you!"

"This is the last time we'll meet, Juzo Sakakura. Later." The mysterious man stalked off to wherever he was going, leaving the defeated boxer in shame.

*How was he able to beat me? In all the fights I've been in, I've never seen anything like him… His moves were perfect, and I was read so easily. Was I too injured? Juzo slammed his fist on the ground. What the hell is he…?*

VVV

The building Chiaki was running through was dusty and had old supplies scattered everywhere. The gamer zoomed up the stairs with impressive speed because the drugs were still active. She was starting to get worried an addiction to the performance enhancer might form because the feeling it gave was incredibly liberating. After discarding her fear, she focused on pursuing Kitta.

Finally, after blazing through a seemingly endless array of stairs, she saw the door leading to the roof had already been open. She ran through the doorway and was greeted with harsh gusts created by the looming helicopter. Kitta was spotted, and she appeared to have already climbed to the top of the ladder.

Chiaki broke into a full sprint as the aerial vehicle began to leave. The ladder was still hanging down, giving the gamer an opportunity. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have even been able to think about doing what she was going to try. Even so, she tapped into her new strength and jumped off the rooftop before barely catching the ladder. Chiaki felt like she was in an action movie before looking down and remembered how high off the ground she was.

*Just pretend it's that simulator game where you fly a jet…she thought with her eyes closed.*

The gamer climbed the ladder while making sure to keep her gaze upwards. She didn't think about what was below, opting to focus on her target above. Her boosted strength was allowing her to climb the ladder with ease. As she neared the top, Chiaki grabbed the tracking device out of her pocket. She reached out, with all her length, and managed to plant the device on the helicopter.

*I did it! she thought, feeling joy in her accomplishment.*

"Isn't this tragic?" stated a voice coming from above. Chiaki looked up into the hate-filled eyes of Kitta Takara. "Someone has flown too close to the sun!" Without warning, Kitta stomped Chiaki in the face, making her fall off the ladder. "Haha, have a nice fall, phony savior!"
The stomp itself didn't hurt—she couldn't feel much pain right now—but she was terrified while her form plummeted towards the hard surface. She knew no amount of Seiko's concoction would save her from death at this height.

"Right there!" exclaimed Kyoko, who had been dutifully following the action in the car. She hastily jumped out, grabbed the other device, and threw it at the spot Chiaki would fall. The gamer was still dropping when the device below her went off, momentarily stopping her momentum before she began falling again at a much safer height. The detective put her good arm out to catch the gamer and was successful.

"Ugh," grunted Chiaki, who was lying on something, "thanks, Kirigiri. What was that?"

"...It was an anti-gravity mine."

"The Future Foundation sure does have the coolest weapons."

"I'm glad you're safe, Nanami, but our current position is a bit...compromising."

"Huh?" Chiaki lifted her head off the ground and saw what Kyoko was referring to. The gamer was right on top of the detective, and their faces were close enough to feel each other's breath.

"Oh my," stated a voice Chiaki could never forget.

The duo looked to see Chisa, Ruruka, and Sonosuke along with many Future Foundation agents in tow. They all questioningly looked at both of them because they seemed peculiar out of context.

"The rumors are true!" yelled Ruruka, pointing and laughing.

The two division leaders scrambled to get off the earth while they had embarrassed looks.

"Nice catch, Kirigiri."

"No problem."

"We should do this again."

"Sure...but I'm driving next time."

VVV

Multiple Future Foundation units in the area had been sent to rescue the ambushed agents. Most of them were taking the hostages into care and arresting any affiliated with the Despara Carnival. Kitta, Black Rider, and Enigma all managed to escape, but the participants and many onlookers were promptly brought into custody. When Chiaki and Kyoko asked what happened to Juzo, they were both shocked to learn about his bad condition and that the culprit was the obscure Enigma.

Juzo was taken in for medical attention, and Kyoko opted to put her injured arm in a sling. When the detective asked how their location was found, Chisa claimed they had gotten lucky. Chiaki's phone and game console were returned to her, and Kyoko had her things recovered. The detective informed every one of her improvisations to the plan as well as the tracking device on the helicopter.

At the moment, those back at headquarters were being updated on the situation while mostly everyone was taking a breather. They set up camp and was awaiting further instruction.

As she was told, Chiaki was privately telling Chisa what happened. She still wondered if the
housekeeper had colluded with the Despairs, but held her tongue. The incredible performance enhancer had finally worn off at this time and left the gamer with some annoying fatigue.

"Enigma?" replied Chisa, looking interested. "Why would he be interested in you?"

"I don't know. He knew about the savior thing and…being near him felt strange. He asked me who I thought he was, and I said Izuru Kamakura. But, that can't be right because he thinks that fake story about the Reserve Course students torturing me was real."

"…Do you really think that? He could've been lying."

"So, you think it's someone that knows the truth? Could it be one of the Remnants of Despair?"

"…Well, we'll find out more about your mystery admirer in the future. Knowing Future Foundation information, having clout among the Despairs, and defeated Sakakura so handily… It seems like an interesting piece has entered the board…"

Chiaki saw her former teacher have a far-off look she'd never seen before. However, like she had put on a different face, Chisa brightly smiled at the gamer before she said, "I heard from multiple sources how incredible you were during the Despara Carnival! I don't suppose that gift I gave you a few months ago had something to do with it?" Chiaki averted her eyes, and Chisa laughed in response.

"Boss!" yelled a woman, running towards them.

"Asahina?" muttered Chiaki before she was tackled with a hug by the former Ultimate Swimming Pro.

"I knew it! I knew you guys weren't dead!"

"She cornered me before I left and begged me to come," informed Chisa. "As did another hope-filled guy."

"Hehe, hope-filled guy?" replied a smiling Makoto Naegi, rubbing the back of his head.

So, that's him…thought Chiaki. This marked the first occasion she had met the person a lot of people were calling Ultimate Hope.

"You both didn't have to quit what you were doing to come here," stated Kyoko, approaching the group. She had been busy giving her report to the vice chairman.

"Don't be like that, Kirigiri," said Aoi. "Our jobs can wait. We wanted to make sure you were alright and help you with the rest of this mission."

"Togami has everything taken care of back at the Fourteenth Division, so you don't have to worry about that," informed Makoto. "Fukawa wanted to come, but she was busy. Hagakure is…doing Hagakure stuff."

"I hate to break up the party," began Ruruka, "but we've just gotten clearance to pursue Takara like you wanted, Yukizome."

"Of course we did," said Chisa. "According to the tracking device, Takara is headed towards Russia—for some reason. Are you all prepared to travel overseas?" Chisa looked at the determined faces of everyone before smiling. "Ha, with the savior and Ultimate Hope on our team, this should be easy. Get ready everyone… We're going after the ringleader of the Despara Carnival, Kitta.
Takara, immediately."
Save the Doctrine

For as long as I can remember, thought a young girl, I've hated how this world works. The only way to receive recognition is to have a talent and pander to those below—the bottom dwellers. My beautiful light is too much for idiots like these to comprehend. If only someone could understand…

A twelve-year-old girl, adorned in an expensive white dress, watched with apathy while many people in suits and dresses were mingling in her father's mansion. She detested this meeting of high-ranking corporate businessmen and bureaucrats, but her father made attending these parties mandatory. A man that appeared to be close with his family was favorable in the eyes of the hungry media. Public image meant everything to the donors and stockholders, after all.

This truly was, in Kitta Takara's mind, a loathsome and uninspiring event.

"You look bored."

Kitta turned to meet the gaze of a young girl that appeared to be close to her age. Her frigid blue eyes were alluring, her purple gown complemented her silky blond hair, and she had a mystique of confidence and flamboyance around her. She didn't know why—but this stranger reminded Kitta of herself, in some ways.

"I love that pink hair."

"I dyed it myself since my natural hair color is dull."

"Same here, actually. Are social gatherings not your forte?"

"Tch, I hate these stupid things. Daddy only wants me to come to these so he can seem like a family man. Nobody ever seems to ask why he has seven kids by seven different wives."

"I find these events boring too. It's all just pompous adults stroking their own egos. My agent insists on me attending them so he can find some high-profile gigs."

"Wait…I remember you now." It didn't come to Kitta at first, but she had seen this girl before. "You're that popular up and coming child celebrity. I've seen you in lots of magazines and advertisements. I even hear you've got a big acting role coming up."

"What can I say? People can't get enough of me."

"I figured someone like you would love events like these since you're a darling in the public's eyes."

"They're nothing but cockroaches that crawl after the crumbs I leave for them."

Kitta smiled at the girl's assertion. "It's not just limited to them, though. I think all ordinary people are nothing but ants while I'm a glorious sun allowing them to bask in my beautiful light. Those below should know their place. They only exist for my benefit."

"You sure have a hierarchical view of the world. I guess being a billionaire since birth does that. Then again, you're pretty famous yourself. Your fame as the new hotshot idol is the hot topic."

"Heh, in just a year's time, I'll have my name in lights. My goal will be within reach."

"Would that goal be…Hope's Peak Academy?" Kitta practically had question marks in her eyes,
making Junko snicker for a moment. "I did a lot of research on your family. Most of them are Hope's Peak alumni, right?"

Kitta averted her eyes. "Soon, Daddy will decide who inherits the massive fortune our family has after he passes away. If I don't get accepted as an Ultimate, I won't have a chance… I'll be a laughing stock." The pink-haired girl looked at the blond girl with intrigue. "That will never happen, obviously. Why are you interested in my family?"

"It's not your family I'm interested in—it's you. I've determined…you're the one who'll help me get what I want."

"…What do you want? Money?"

The girl gestured for Kitta to follow. Kitta, not seeing a reason to refuse, walked behind her. They walked for a minute until they reached an outdoor balcony. Since they were at a tall penthouse in the middle of the city, there was an amazing view of the area under a dark-blue sky.

"I find myself bored with this current world," she said. "All my life, I've been looking for that thrill to satisfy me. I've done lots of research, built a fortune for myself, and met countless people. During my search for an answer—I finally found it…" The girl looked straight at Kitta. "Despair."

Kitta had no idea what to make of this girl's proclamation. "What are you talking about?"

The girl looked towards the illuminated city below. "We live in a society where peace and harmony are preached as gospel. However, think of a society where everyone was allowed to express their deepest desires; a society where the idea of a harmony-filled utopia was just a fallacy. What do you think it would be like?"

"…It would be complete chaos. I can't even begin to imagine what would happen."

"Bingo, we have a winner!" exclaimed the girl with excitement. "That's exactly what I want! The unpredictability, chaos, and abnormalities—I want it all! I've been working towards that goal, but I've recently come to a roadblock. I need a loyal accomplice who'll help me, sort of like a business partner. For that reason, I've come to you. So…have I found the right person?"

Kitta felt an unprecedented sensation flowing in her mind. Just a few minutes ago, the two were having a casual conversation. Now, this unique blond was going on about a grand scheme. Before Kitta could respond, the blond spoke again.

"Let's be clear here. I don't want to turn the establishment on its head—I want to burn it down and dance on the ashes. The suppressed majority will be unleashed, and only those truly worthy can stand on top in the end. There's no doubt in my mind…you're one of those people."

This person…

She knew what the feeling was that consumed her—fascination.

She had felt uninterested in this typical world as well. Knowing someone who felt similarly and deemed her worthy to stand on top of the despair-ridden world made a large smile appear on her face. She didn't know how, but this girl caught her interest unlike anyone before. This girl sounded so confident in what she was saying, her assertions sounded apodictic.

This is the person I've been waiting for!

"I think I can help you after all," stated Kitta. "If despair is the key, I want to see what's behind the
door for myself." Kitta stuck out her hand. "Let's introduce ourselves formally because we'll be working together from this point on. I'm Kitta Takara."

"Nice to be working with you," replied the blond girl, shaking Kitta's hand with a wide smile. "I'm Junko Enoshima."

VVV

Over the next three years, the duo's popularity continued to increase. Junko had become a world-famous fashionista, and Kitta was on her way to becoming the top idol.

Nobody suspected what these two cultural icons were actually doing. They were negotiating with figures that ranged from corporate tycoons to ungoverned gang coalitions. Kitta would use her power and influence to set up the meetings while Junko coerced them with her despair-ridden philosophy. All the while, their professions allowed them to travel the world at their leisure.

It was a cold December day while the two were visiting a new piece of property Junko bought in Russia.

"So, you really did buy a castle," stated Kitta, looking around at the huge interior. "I've seen bigger, but this is still nice."

"It'll be undergoing renovations," answered Junko while spinning around like a little kid. "It needs to be molded more in my image. You can consider this place our new base of operations."

"I suppose it'll do. What's the news on the Steering Committee?"

"They couldn't resist me!"

Kitta raised an eyebrow because Junko made a weird cutesy expression and spoke in a high-pitched voice. "...What the hell was that?"

"Sorry, it's a new quirk I've been working on to better ease my boredom. I'm still working on improving the transitions." Junko pulled an envelope out of her jacket pocket. "Anyway, the Steering Committee has agreed to cooperate. In exchange for allowing them to study my analysis talent, they'll support me and provide information on a project I'm looking into. My admission to Hope's Peak Academy as the Ultimate Fashionista has been assured. I won't require a scout, and I'll be eligible to attend along with the seventy-eight class."

"Hehe, it's amazing how everything you predict comes true. My acceptance into the academy is a given. What about your sister?"

"That eyesore will easily be an Ultimate. She's told me they've already scouted her as the Ultimate Soldier."

"How does a small, young girl become the Ultimate Soldier?"

"It's a boring tale about a boring girl."

"Whatever." Kitta smiled in anticipation when she thought of the day her letter of acceptance would come. "I'll probably be scouted any day now."

VVV

Fast-forwarding a year later, the malevolent duo was staying in an expensive five-star hotel. Junko
was sitting on a couch with her legs crossed, observing the raucous yet humorous scene in front of her.

Kitta was shouting obscenities while hurling objects around the room and out the window. It got so bad, multiple employees would investigate before seeing whom the culprit was—they decided intervention wouldn't be wise.

"Let it out, Kitta," commented Junko.

"Can you fucking believe this crap!" she yelled, flipping over a table. "My Ultimate title goes to that overrated bitch, Sayaka Maizono! How the hell could this happen!"

"She is popular in Japan. Hope's Peak does tend to favor students from the homeland, or so I've heard."

"It still makes no fucking sense! I'm more popular and successful in nearly every meaningful statistic! There has to be some mistake! There has to be…"

Kitta proceeded to grab any object within reach and throw it against the wall. With the amount of property she was damaging, even her large bank account would take a dent. When she was out of breath, the idol fell to her knees while her make-up started running from the ensuing tears.

Junko pouted as the funny display of despair and grief started to get stale. "Would you get a grip? Maybe you could take out your frustration out on the staff by going on a murder spree?"

"…You should've seen Daddy's face—he'll never acknowledge me again. All my family thinks I'm a disgrace to our name. Even worse…now that the news has been leaked to the public, my sales and followers have begun decreasing in number. My life is over…and we'll have to change our plans."

"Excuse me?" Junko made a stern expression before standing over Kitta. "Not happening. You're going to Hope's Peak, one way or another. If you couldn't get in as an Ultimate, you'll have to take the other way."

Kitta looked up at Junko in shock. "Y-you're not suggesting I join the damn Reserve Course! What would I look like if I'm apart of those talentless scum who crawl under the feet of Ultimates!"

"You'll look normal because you don't have a talent. It's not like tuition is a problem for you."

"That's not the issue! If I do this…I'll be those ants I said were below me. I might as well be dead…"

"…Kitta, do you know why I chose you that day at your father's party?"

"What?" The idol had never heard Junko have a sincere-sounding tone like that before. The fashionista was usually so erratic and witty, it was hard to imagine her taking something seriously.

"I normally hate being around the same person for too long, but you're different. If you feel angry the elite didn't accept you—do something about it. Make your crappy family and ungrateful fans see just how bright you are. Help me drown the fools who won't support you in despair. I don't care if you're not an Ultimate—I need you." Junko stuck out her hand while smiling. "You'll always be my BFF!"

"Junko…" The disgruntled idol didn't know how to respond. Nobody had ever made her feel so needed and welcomed. In the depth of her despair, she had found a guiding symbol.
"Don't suffocate in the despair, Kitta. Embrace it."

"Okay," began Kitta, grabbing Junko's hand, "I'll do it."

VVV

After another year had passed, with Junko and Kitta still setting up things along the way, the duo was sitting in the mall while snacking on some ice cream cones. They were wearing disguises, but an onlooker saw through their facade. They had to scramble into Junko's limousine and drive away from the hectic scene before the bothersome paparazzi showed up.

"Can't a beautiful girl enjoy ice cream in peace?" said Junko, taking her sunglasses off. "It's been a while since we've been here, but we're still mega popular in Japan."

"Don't you mean... you're popular?" Kitta was resting her head on her hand with a melancholic expression. "They all were asking for your autograph, not mine."

"There you go, being a buzzkill again. You should be enjoying yourself. We won't see each other after this since you have to go back to America, and I have to make a trip back to Europe. Do you want to throw some happy-grenades out the window? That'll cheer you up."

"Nah, I just want to hurry and get this crap over with. Why does the Steering Committee want to meet now? School isn't for a few months."

"It's important to discuss all the boring, trivial terms in person. Once school starts, moving around is gonna be tougher. Also, they're convinced the school might be infiltrated by spies that are investigating them."

"What do you care? It's not like anybody could stop us, and you could care less what happens to those hyenas after you're done with them."

"I still need to keep them happy, for now. Their support is needed for the next phase of the plan."

"If you say so." Kitta's eyes widened when she remembered something. "I almost forgot; I managed to track down that person you were looking for."

A smile crossed Junko's face. "That's my crafty Kitta. I'll need to have a talk with them, ASAP."

"What do you want with some old Hope's Peak alumni?"

"Their talent will come in handy down the line."

Kitta decided not to delve into what Junko intended. If she didn't tell her the specifics, it must not involve her in any way. The limousine had pulled up to a stoplight while Junko undid some of the buttons on her coat. She began to roll down the window to ease the heat. "Ugh, is the driver trying to get us to take off all our clothes or something? I should've—"

Junko stopped talking when she saw something interesting on the sidewalk. It lasted for a second—but she met the gaze of another girl. The girl was wearing a uniform and carried a few shopping bags. For some reason, Junko's mind went blank before the car began moving again. She stared off into space, even when Kitta patted her shoulder.

"Hey!"

"…Huh?"
"What's up with you? You never space out like that."

Junko blinked before laying her head back. "...It's nothing. Just tired from the long trip. I'm taking a nap."

While those two were driving off, the girl who was on the receiving end of Junko's glare was still.

"Nanami!" yelled Sonia, running to her class rep. "Is something the matter?"

"No, it's just that I saw this girl who looked like a celebrity." The gamer tilted her head as she thought of a good comparison. "She looked like royalty form a fantasy game, I think."

"It sounds like she would be one of those cool heroines from movies or a novel, just like you!"

"Heh, I don't think that's a role I'm fit for."

"Well, I beg to differ." Sonia grabbed Chiaki's free hand and pulled her along. "Let us be off! The others will get impatient!"

Chiaki smiled as the energetic Ultimate Princess could always lift her spirit. Her mind drifted back to the girl she saw. *I wonder if she goes to Hope's Peak...*

VVV

The malevolent duo began attending Hope's Peak Academy when the school year started. Junko went on to do her thing in the main building while Kitta attended the dreaded Reserve Course. Every day, Kitta would frown and bear it, knowing she was forced to stand on the same level as a bunch of untalented students. The self-loathing and depressing atmosphere could asphyxiate a person's spirit. Still, she kept her goal in mind and endured it.

There was a day where Kitta happened to be walking around campus and spotted the seventy-eight class hanging out. She saw Sayaka and had to dig her nails into her arm to prevent herself from doing something rash. Since Junko and Kitta were busy setting things up, they decided it'd be best to keep out of contact when at school. That left the idol to quietly simmer by herself on days like this.

At last, after many months of suffering, the rich girl saw the most beautiful sight in her life.

"Finally!" yelled Kitta, witnessing the Reserve Course be torn apart right before her eyes in the distance. Seeing the facility that caused her such misery being destroyed was beyond satisfying. If this is what despair looked like—she wanted more of it. Her ebullient feeling felt like it would never fade.

"Enjoying the show?" asked Junko, who approached her.

"Hell yeah! I've been waiting months for this moment! I can't believe everything has gone this smoothly!"

"Well, I am me. I meant to find you earlier... but an annoying housekeeper was bothering me. You remember what to do next, right?"

"Of course." A sinister smile crossed her face. "It's almost time for the grand opening!"

Suddenly, Junko handed Kitta a letter. The idol was caught off guard when the false fashionista hugged her and widely smiled.
"Tootles, my BFF!" Junko exclaimed. "May the despair always be with you! I really did love our time together! Oh, and open that letter if I happen to die."

"H-huh?" stammered Kitta, still surprised by the sudden hug. Junko walked away, leaving the idol in confusion. "What do you mean! Aren't you coming back after you're done…?"

However, she was too late. Kitta stood still while the destruction of the Reserve Course was still audible.

VVV

Just a few months afterward, the Tragedy was in full swing and despair was on the rise.

Currently, Kitta was visiting a secret underground facility. She was being led down the hallways by gang members. There were guards equipped with firearms on standby everywhere, ready to fire at the first sign of trouble. All the security were underlings of a massive crime syndicate, led by a member of Ultimate Despair. Her escort ended when she arrived at a pair of doors.

_The rumors about this guy were serious_, thought Kitta. _There's enough manpower in here to overthrow a small country._

While being wary not to make any ill-advised moves, Kitta walked through the doorway and was greeted by a large room containing two people. There was a man, rather small in stature, sitting behind a desk in a suit and fedora.

The second individual made the hairs on the back of Kitta's neck stand up. It was a woman, equipped with a katana along with the most intimidating gaze Kitta had ever seen—even by Despair standards. She knew, somehow, this woman would kill her in a second if she stepped out of line.

"I take it you're the boss?" asked Kitta, who sat in a chair opposite of the man. She spoke in a soft and polite voice. That wasn't her style, but this was the last person she wanted to piss off by mistake.

"Well, aren't you Captain Fucking Obvious? Cut to the chase, and tell me the job."

"I need several targets captured and imprisoned." Kitta pulled out a sheet of paper filled with names and other information. "Word is, you're the best person for a job like this. I've given you my identification, so I trust you know I'll be able to pay my expenses without an issue."

The man looked at the papers for a few seconds before gazing back at Kitta. "Do you have a deadline?" he asked.

"I'd prefer it to be done within three weeks and delivered to the exact location I wrote down."

"It'll be done in two—we're done here."

"…Cool."

Kitta didn't dare argue while she rose from her seat and scurried away as if she was a pig running from a slaughterhouse. The further she got away from this place, the better. Even so, she couldn't control the ravenous smile her face contorted into. In a short time, her beautiful creation would be unveiled.

VVV
Transitioning a few weeks later, the scene shifted to an arena full of rowdy Despairs. They were all screaming and cheering while a certain musician was putting on a performance. Kitta had commissioned her to warm up the crowd for the grand opening of the Despara Carnival. She thought the screamo music sounded ghastly but ignored it because the crowd was eating it up.

"If you love despair," shouted the former Ultimate Musician, Ibuki Mioda, "let me hear you scream!"

"Seriously, who regularly listens to this crap?" muttered Kitta, getting ready to make her grand entrance from an area under the stage. She was wearing her favorite one piece, leggings, and stilettos.

_The ringleader and greatest idol of the despair-filed world will make her long-anticipated entrance in seconds! Those yakuza are beyond amazing. To think they got nearly everyone I asked for. I still wish I could've had Sayaka Maizono and that idiot in the Future Foundation who scouted her…_

"It's almost time!" gleefully yelled a red-haired girl with a camera. "I can't wait to capture all the images of despair!"

"You better damn well do that. I traveled all the way to that backwater country in the middle of nowhere to borrow your talent. My sources tell me the former Ultimate Photographer is a master in capturing the essence of despair in their photos."

"Haha, you bet!" Mahiru's expression transformed from a delightful smile to a malicious and vile one. "I can't wait to capture the despair of all those corpses. Just so you know—I'm better at capturing the suffering of men than women."

"Yeah, just take your position."

The photographer skipped off while Kitta walked to the spot that would rise until she was on stage. _I don't know exactly how Junko went about it, but Ultimate Despair is even greater than I thought. Hehe, it's time for my beautiful form to shine. It's showtime!_

Kitta closed her eyes while her form slowly rose. She took in every bit of the moment as slow as possible. This was finally her time, and she was going to enjoy it to the fullest. Soon, her ears were bombarded with loud and rigorous cheering. She walked through the dissipating smoke, grabbed the microphone, and put it near her lips.

"Hello, one and all!" she announced. "It's your beautiful, beloved, and majestic idol of this despair-driven world—Kitta Takara!" Once again, she shut her eyes and absorbed the loud cheering emanating from the crowd. The ecstasy she was feeling would only grow once she faced her hostages.

"Kitta?" said a middle-aged man, who was bound, just like the other captives. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Why, just look around you—Daddy. I've invited you, all your ex-wives, my annoying siblings among other members of our family, people of the disgusting media who slandered me, and a whole lot more. Do you know what all of you have in common?"

"I don't—"

"I hate you all, of course! You all looked down on me, laughed at me, and disowned me! Now, all of you will be the first ever hostages to kick off my glorious spectacle. Bring in the contestants!"
Over a dozen intimidating figures lined up in front of the hostages, all equipped with a variety of weapons. Kitta's captives had looks of sadness, fear, and disbelief while their despair set in.

Kitta's father gulped before he pleadingly looked at his daughter's smiling face. "Kitta...you're my little girl. Don't do this. Come down here and talk to your father."

"...Daddy, do you remember what you told me the day I got rejected from Ultimate status by Hope's Peak Academy?"

"Kitta—"

"You said to never speak to you again. Well...I guarantee we'll never speak after this! Now, it's time for you to sink into despair!"

"Don't do this! How could you murder your family!"

Her father, along with everyone else, was beginning to realize how inevitable it was to reason with Kitta. They were all about to be consigned to a brutal death for entertainment. Kitta salivated all their faces...as despair finally consumed all the people she loathed.

"You'll all be the stepping stone towards me becoming the icon of this new world! Get ready...for the Despara Carnival!"

VVV

One day, Kitta ventured to Junko's castle and secluded herself. The reason being that the killing game of the seventy-eight class had begun. The pure ecstasy she felt when Sayaka was stabbed and killed was indescribable for Kitta. She laughed for minutes on end as the girl who stole her precious title was dead.

However, after the killing game had concluded, the ringleader was on her knees with tears streaming down her face.

"...Why?" she said to no one. "How could you let those pathetic pieces of shit beat you! We were supposed to stand on top of the world together! How could you leave me..."

Kitta's eyes widened when she remembered some of Junko's last words. Just as she had asked, Kitta had kept the letter all this time. She fished it out of her pocket and read the contents with anticipation. Her eyes scanned the words on the paper as if they'd fade like invisible ink if she didn't hurry. After she finished reading, there were two main parts that stuck with her.

...A woman in a riding suit and a man wearing a mask of her face? What relation do they have to her? Well, if Junko says to work with them, they must be useful for something. More importantly...you want me to keep conducting our plan to spread despair, Junko? You always planned to have me carry on your legacy, didn't you? Okay, I'll keep the Despara Carnival alive and lead this world into everlasting despair. That's my tribute to you —my only friend...

VVV

Now, transitioning back to the present, the ringleader was sitting on a silver throne with a bored look on her face. It wasn’t like her to be nostalgic, but she had been reminiscing about past events. She was relaxing in the custom-made throne room in Junko's castle. As the blond mastermind said before, her first move was to retreat to this castle if the heat got turned up too high.
Where the hell are they? thought Kitta, referring to Black Rider and Enigma. Black Rider probably got away, but I don’t know about that masked weirdo. That freak better not have gotten himself caught. Kitta shook her head, discarding the thought. No, there’s no way he got caught. He’s uncanny, but he’s strangely capable.

Kitta’s thoughts turned to her ruined Despara Carnival. A scowl crossed her face when she remembered the shame. Once word got out about the debacle, her stock among the Despairs might fall. To make matters worse, the main component of the train wreck was the former Ultimate Gamer—of all things. She hadn’t felt frustration like this since Sayaka.

"To think that gamer dweeb was capable enough to defeat experienced killers. It's been a long time since I've felt this humiliated…" She put a hand on her face while narrowing her eyes. "I'll personally make sure you die next time, Chiaki Nanami. I wonder if that midget gangster could do the job now…?"

"Ms. Takara," announced one of the servants that regularly attending to the castle. Naturally, they were all in despair. "The Future Foundation is within a kilometer of the castle's entrance."

"What!" shouted a flabbergasted Kitta. "How did they find us! It's not—"

Kitta stopped when a certain memory came to her. When she spotted Chiaki on the helicopter's ladder, she figured the gamer was trying to get to her. However, the idol began to think of another possibility. She clenched her fist angrily when her hypothesis began making more sense. Then… Kitta replaced her anger with malice.

"... Was Chiaki Nanami spotted with them?"

"She is a part of the convoy, yes. Do you want us to—"

"Tell everyone to remain on standby in the ballroom. We have guests, so let's make them feel welcome. I'll be in the special room."

The servant nodded and departed the throne room. Kitta rose and smiled in excitement.

Come at me, Future Foundation. Where I'm going, I'll be invincible. I know exactly who I want to take care of first. The face of the supposed savior crossed her mind. This will be one game you won't enjoy, phony savior.
Save the Malice Masquerade

The cool wind blew across a dense forest the Future Foundation agents were now in. A mostly bright sky overhead was a welcome sight because it reminded them how despair was on the decline. It was almost as if the Earth itself was in a period of recovery.

Still, they were all on pins and needles because it was enemy territory they were crossing. Just a kilometer away, as they all knew thanks to information found by those back at base, lay Junko's castle. A convoy protectively surrounded the division leaders in case a trap or ambush happened.

"This stinks," groaned Ruruka, tired from the walking—despite being carried on her boyfriend's back. "We're the Future Foundation; can't we just blow that castle away?"

"It could hold valuable information, Ando," answered Chisa, merrily strolling about. "It's crucial we retrieve Takara alive. A siege is better than an all-out assault, in this situation."

"Who even cares about that? Enoshima is dead, and the Future Foundation is too big to fail at this point. I say we not risk it, and destroy them all."

"Just because we have the power, doesn't mean we can annihilate everything in our way. That's not the direction I or the chairman want this organization to go. Just trust my judgment. When have I led us astray?"

Ruruka pouted a bit. "You always get to do what you want. Why don't you just take Tengan and Munakata's jobs while you're at it?"

"I'm quite happy with my position. That workload would prove too much for even the former Ultimate Housekeeper to achieve on her own."

"Whatever." Ruruka yawned before resting her head on Sonosuke's shoulder. "Wake me up if something happens, babe." In no time at all, the confectioner fell into a slumber.

The housekeeper giggled. "I'm honestly impressed she could fall asleep in these circumstances. Although, it shows how much she trusts you."

"I suppose."

"You're impressive yourself, you know? Sonosuke Izayoi, a boy prodigy, and genius at crafting many kinds of tools. Your father was pretty good, but your works were at an entirely different level. Why, at the age of fifteen, you were being labeled the modern day Hatori Hanzo. It led to you being the only person in history to achieve the title of Ultimate Blacksmith. Your talents aren't just limited to iron, right?"

"I started with iron, but I always had an interest in crafting other things. It doesn't matter if it's blades, guns, or robotics… If it's a weapon, I want to try making it my way."

"Artisans, collectors, and royalty from across the world traveled to see your work. You played a big part in making something complex like VEIL for my darling Chiaki, and even Kyosuke was so impressed, he commissioned you to make him several diverse katanas." Chisa entwined her fingers behind her back. "I always wanted to know how the Ultimate Blacksmith and Ultimate Confectioner came to be, if it's not too personal."

"…I was always so busy helping my father in the shop, I was never really around other kids. There
was this nice lady who would bring her daughter, Ruruka, along to give us snacks they'd make for the neighborhood. Her daughter's snacks were so good, I asked if she could make me some every day. Since then, I don't think a day has gone by we haven't been together."

"Wow, that's an impressive childhood relationship. You two were made for each other. A quiet, loyal, and strong guy who'll stroke her massive ego when needed, hehe." Chisa narrowed her eyes. "Still, you should be more on guard—those close to us can often become the most dangerous."

"What are you saying?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking of how sad it would be if, say…she betrayed you. Ando can be impulsive. That would be an unfortunate ending, I think."

"Why would—"

"I know she'd never do that. I let my imagination run wild when I'm anxious. It's a shame there's nothing to clean because it always calms me down. Don't mind me." Chisa cruised on ahead while Sonosuke averted his eyes.

"Ah!" yelled Aoi, swatting a huge spider from her legs. "These bugs are gigantic! Why couldn't we ride through here on a tank or something?"

"That would've taken too long to prepare," answered Kyoko, fishing a spider web—with her good arm—out of her hair. "We also want the element of surprise. It's strange, though…"

"How we haven't been attacked by a giant man-eating insect yet?"

"I expected there to be traps set around the perimeter of the castle. You'd think Enoshima would be thorough enough to do that much. We're nearing the castle and haven't encountered any kind of resistance…"

"Well, we are supposed to be sneaking up on them. Maybe they just haven't noticed?" Aoi took a quick swing at a rather large fly. "Why did Enoshima even want this place in the middle of nowhere? She was so rich, you'd think she'd buy a beautiful mansion on a beach."

"She likely bought multiple properties around the world. If she was negotiating and conspiring with many organizations, it would make sense why she wanted different places of residence."

"What if there's some super-weapon here…like a giant Monokuma robot the size of a skyscraper?"

"I would say that's ridiculous, but considering what we're dealing with…who knows what they're keeping hidden? There must be something of use if Takara's first move was to hide here."

"I just hope nothing like the Despara Carnival happens again…" Aoi balled her fists while the haunting images of the victim's bodies penetrated her mind. She used to the brutality of Despairs, but the thought of someone making a spectacle out of it was sickening. "How can anybody get off on this stuff? The killing game that took our friends, the Despara Carnival… Just what happened to Enoshima and Takara to make them want something like that?"

"I'm not sure of Enoshima's true desires, nor do think I ever will. Takara, however, exhibits all the signs of a petulant child. A desire for attention, entitlement, emotional instability, and unacceptability."

"Whatever she is, people like her and the Remnants of Despair need to be stopped. The Tragedy has done nothing but ruin families. I still don't know where mine is, or if they're still alive…"
"She'll be stopped," stated Kyoko with a firm look. "I'll see to it."

"Heh, you're a lot more comforting than you used to be. Could it be Naegi rubbing off on you, eh?"

Kyoko flicked her hair uncomfortably. "...If that's what you think."

"You're letting your cute side show, Kirigiri. Does Nanami have competition?" The former Ultimate Swimmer laughed while Kyoko sighed. "I could really go for a snack. Something fried with a sweet topping I could eat at my leisure..."

"Would that be...a donut?"

"Holy cow! How did you guess?"

Kyoko smiled a bit. "Elementary."

"Wow... You really are the best detective." Aoi stopped talking for a second when she heard the duo behind her. "Hehe, it's like a battle of who's more modest."

"No, you're unbelievable for becoming a division leader," stated Makoto.

"It's nothing much," replied Chiaki. "You're incredible for being able to overcome Junko."

"I was only able to do that with everyone's help. It's cool how people respect you enough to consider you their savior."

"That's just a joke. People really do think you're Ultimate Hope, though."

"Ha, I'm not all the deserving of that title."

The humble duo shared a laugh at their inability to boast. After dealing with psychotic housekeepers and uptight superior's all the time, talking with types like Makoto was refreshing. Despite having his talent be the ridiculed Ultimate Luck, he didn't seem to mind much. Any notion of being called Ultimate Hope was met with humble denial from him. In a way, his optimism reminded her of how she used to be as the class representative.

"Were you afraid...? Facing Junko, I mean?"

Makoto looked to the side. "At first, when we found out who it was, it was shocking to see the person forcing us to murder each other was a young girl—it's a different story hearing her talk. The look in her eyes, demeanor, the way she speaks... it's enough to overwhelm anybody. I want to believe everybody has the power to embrace hope, but there's no question that Junko Enoshima... is the total embodiment of despair."

Chiaki couldn't agree with the statement more, for obvious reasons. "Still, you tried to keep her from killing herself. Why?"

"... I guess I wanted her to atone for her crimes and maybe, one day, realize what she was doing was wrong. But, after our memories were restored, there's still something else that bothers me."

"Like what?"

"During Hope's Peak, she was deceiving us about being our friend. What threw me off is... when I remembered the trial, it still didn't seem like she was completely authentic. Something just felt off... maybe? I don't really know how to explain it."
"...Do you think she had a different goal?"

"I don't think she was lying about wanting despair. It's just a weird feeling I had... You know what, forget it; I'm thinking too hard. I remember Ikusaba was more withdrawn and nice. She helped me out on a few occasions, but I guess that could've been an act." Makoto was silent for a moment. "What kind of things did you do at Hope's Peak Academy?"

"I was the class representative. I would plan events and help keep harmony among everyone."

"Whoa, that's great! Having an awesome talent and everyone's respect must've been fun."

Chiaki grinned when she began to feel a little embarrassed. "I really didn't do much. Also, I don't think my talent is all that special. I love games...but I don't think it means anything."

"Of course it does. I remember reading cool things about the Ultimate Gamer on the internet. Hehe, be glad your talent isn't luck."

"You don't feel trapped by it? It's all most people ever expect from me, and it's the only thing I'm good at. I feel like people without talent have more freedom to do what they want and pursue anything."

"Nah, I think that's wrong. I played video games all the time, and I would've been happy if that was my talent. And, like hope, I think possibilities exist for anyone who looks for them—talent or no talent. You're a division leader, the savior, and you stopped the Despara Carnival; I don't think games are the only reason you accomplished all of that."

_Possibilities exist for people who look for it, regardless of talent..._ The gamer smiled as those words sunk in. It was like a precise line her dear therapist friend would tell her. "Thank you, Naegi."

"No problem." Makoto scratched the back of his head. "I guess even in a game, my talent would still be pretty lame."

"Luck is pretty irrelevant in nearly every game I've played, so probably."

"Yeah..."

"Although," began Chiaki with a warm smile, "I think the fact you're so incredible—being Ultimate Hope—all your other stats would be incredibly high too. You'd be the overpowered main character."

"Heh," laughed Makoto with a slight blush, "you don't say?"

"Nanami," began Kyoko, abruptly walking to her, "there's something suspicious over there. Go check it out."

"Huh...I don't see—"

"Quickly."

Chiaki, hastily, walked to some bushes to look for whatever Kyoko saw.

Meanwhile, several different reactions were happening: Makoto looked confused, Aoi was doing her best not to laugh, and Chisa was smiling. "Behold the savior's power, Kirigiri," the housekeeper murmured to herself. "Truly frightening."
Their journey through the forest had, so far, gone without any problems. The group was split into ten squads consisting of the main group—containing the division leaders with some lower ranked agents—and nine lesser groups, who were scoping out other areas. Everyone was equipped with communication devices in their ears to constantly check in and give status reports. As of yet, nothing out of the ordinary had been announced.

"Naegi," began Chiaki, "how do you get your hair to stick up like that?"

"Well, you would—"

"Hold on, everyone," interrupted Sonosuke. "We've arrived."

Just ahead of them, was the huge structure of Junko's castle. It looked even more magnificent up close. It had a long driveway leading up to it along with grass, hedges, and trees that were beautifully cut. It overlooked a small lake, and the sunshine made the castle appear like it was glowing. It was hard to see because of how low they were, but it appeared a flag was posted at the top with a black and white scheme. What was more noticeable, however, was that no one was around.

"This close," began Kyoko, "and still nothing."

"Attention, all squads," announced Chisa, opening communications. "Has anybody encountered abnormalities?"

One after one, everyone reported how there was nothing of note to be seen.

"They're expecting us," assumed Sonosuke. "The gate has even been left open."

"Then, let's accept their invitation." Chisa smiled before opening communications again. "Everyone is to convene at the entrance of the castle."

Within minutes, all the squads gathered as they were ordered. They quickly walked up the driveway, crossed the yard, and arrived at the front doors. A few agents acted as the vanguard before attempting to open them. Amazingly, they swung open without any problems. While being wary of traps, they slowly walked through the entrance and was greeted with an eye-opening sight. A room full of many extravagant adornments and decorations invaded their eyesight. There were quality paintings and odd tapestry everywhere. A humongous gold chandelier was overhead while there was a nice scent of lavender in the air. A red carpet covered the floor and a huge staircase, leading to a second floor, was visible. A unique sight was the huge statue in the middle of the floor—a statue who's likeness wasn't hard to figure out.

"I should've figured she was a narcissist," said Aoi, looking at the big statue of Junko. The mastermind had her left arm on her hip and another making a peace sign.

"Greetings, my welcome guests!" yelled a voice that reverberated everywhere. Everyone knew who's voice it belonged to.

"What the hell?" stated Ruruka while she opened her eyes. "What's with all the noise?"

"It's Takara," answered Chisa. "It looks like there are speakers installed in this place."

"Haha, as if this beautiful voice could belong to anyone else! You probably figured this out
already, but you are in Junko's castle! When you're really rich, you can buy things like this—not
that any of you losers know. Junko and I had so much fun hanging out and making our plans for
despair in these walls. Regardless, that's in the past now. Do you know why I let you filth waltz in
here and dirty up the floors?"

"Um," began Aoi, "because you're insane?"

"How rude! You could stand to be a little more courteous to the woman who's hosting you. How
could I not want you all to visit? You've been kind enough to bring several division leaders, that
phony savior, and you even brought along Makoto Naegi! Oh, this day just keeps getting better! I
guess nice things do happen to good people!"

"What is it that you want, you crazy bitch!" yelled Ruruka.

"What I want is to put all your heads on pikes, and place it in the courtyard as a decoration! Today,
I'll get revenge for my ruined Despara Carnival as well as the death of my best friend at the same
time! I'm still getting some things in order, so you'll have to be a little patient. In the meantime, feel
free to explore the castle. I promise there are no traps. Bye now!" The speakers went silent.

"What a sociopath," concluded Ruruka. "We're not going to just do as she says, are we?"

"No matter what we want to do," began Kyoko, "we don't know where she's at in this castle."

"We should explore and find some clues," suggested Makoto. "There could even be some stuff
about the Remnants of Despair in here."

"I doubt they'd leave that information lying around, but I agree," stated Chisa. "Everyone is to
navigate the castle and search for anything useful. Be wary of anything strange, and report in if you
find something."

Not wasting any time, everyone scattered and went for any open hallway they saw while not
dropping their guards. Chiaki took another uncomfortable look at Junko's statue. There was a
certain animosity it was giving off. It was like her ghost was smiling at her from the grave. She left
the ghastly object and went searching.

The first suspicious thing to be found was a huge pair of metal doors that were locked shut from
the other side. It was decided to be investigated later. The rest of the castle didn't seem to have
anything of significant note. Many of the rooms were vacant or filled with old supplies. There were
many rooms that contained books and documents, but no one could find any information about the
Despairs.

"What's that noise?" muttered Makoto, walking into a room filled with bookcases. His eyes were
immediately drawn to the two individuals pulling books out. He raised an eyebrow upon seeing
Chiaki and Aoi's strange antics. "What are you two doing?"

"Boss had a great idea!" answered Aoi. "Maybe, if we keep pulling books out, a secret passage will
appear."

"In games," began Chiaki, "big castles like this have secret areas you can find when you interact
with things."

Makoto scratched his chin. "You are the former Ultimate Gamer. Though, that could actually
work. Mind if I help?"

"The more the merrier!" answered Aoi.
The energetic trio proceeded to pull out books as fast as they could. For a minute, they forgot it was an important investigation, and competed to see who could take out the most books. Any passerby would just shrug and walk away.

"That's five dictionaries now," stated Chiaki. "I'm in the lead with seventy points."

"Darn it," scoffed Aoi. "You're more physically formidable than I thought you'd be! I only have fifty!"

"Hold on…we're keeping score?" asked Makoto. "Also, why does it matter if you pulled out a dictionary?"

"Come on, Naegi! We can't let her beat us! It's for the pride of the seventy-eight class!"

"You're pretty good…but I won't lose," said Chiaki "I can be as swift as a hedgehog!"

_I'm so lost_, thought Makoto. _It's probably best if I just play along_.

Unbeknownst to them, Sonosuke and Ruruka walked by and observed. "Should we—" began Sonosuke before Ruruka cut him off, pulling him along.

"Nope."

After several minutes of intense competition, there were no more books left on the shelves. All of them fell to the floor in exhaustion. In the end, Aoi managed to have the most points after staging an epic comeback.

"You're pretty good, Nanami," complemented Aoi. "It wasn't even a video game, and you still made me go all out. It's surprising how competitive you actually are. I guess that makes sense, with you the being world's greatest gamer."

"I don't know if I'm the greatest. There's still a couple of genres I need improvement in."

"Guys," began Makoto, "did you forget we were supposed to be investigating? We didn't find anything."

Chiaki looked down. "My mistake. I guess it's not that kind of dungeon..."

"Ha, well, I still think it was fun. It reminded me of the fun times we used to have during school, right, Naegi?"

"Yeah." Makoto, suddenly, had a question he wanted to ask Chiaki. "What was the Ultimate Lucky student of the seventy-seventh class like, if you can remember?"

Chiaki made a mental note of what she shouldn't say. "He was smart, unusual, and he really loved Hope's Peak Academy because the Ultimates were symbols of hope. But, he didn't think much of himself and could be a little...unpredictable at times. He was a guy who just wanted to help in his own way, I think. I should've tried harder to understand him."

"I see. So, what happened to—"

"Um…Naegi?" Aoi bent over and whispered in his ear. Chiaki figured she was telling him about the situation of her "missing" classmates. When she finished, Makoto looked down, apologetically.

"Sorry, I didn't know…" Reassuringly, he glanced at her. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure if you just keep believing, you'll find them. Maybe I'll even get to meet them, one day."
Chiaki forced a smile, but her feelings weren't happy ones. She knew full well what her classmates were doing right now. In all likelihood, they might find her before she finds them. "…Maybe."

Before any further conversation could be had, a voice went off in the communication devices in their ears. "There's been a suspicious person spotted in the far-left corridor of the second story. They aren't resisting, but they seem to be guarding a door. They've requested Ms. Nanami be the one to open it."

"What?" Chiaki looked towards Makoto and Aoi to see they looked just as confused.

"Let's go check it out," suggested Aoi.

After they all agreed, the three walked to the designated area with much skepticism. They quickly arrived in a hallway filled with agents keeping their eyes trained on an individual standing in front of a door. The gamer's eyes widened when she saw a female maid wearing a Monokuma mask, just like the one from the prison.

"She requested you," informed Chisa, who was standing by with a casual smile. "She's unarmed."

Chiaki was still hesitant but approached the maid and asked, "Are you the same person I saw in that prison?"

"I have never met you before." She spoke in a soft, wispy voice.

Now that she was close, Chiaki could tell this was a different woman. "What do you want with me?"

The gamer took a step back when the maid reached out to her. The ominous woman opened her palm to reveal a key. "I've been told to give you this key for the door behind me. Personally, I don't know what to feel when I'm in that room…"

Chiaki looked at the key before glancing at Chisa. She could see the demented housekeeper give her permission to do it—or, rather, she was telling her to. The gamer grabbed the key and approached the door. After inserting the key in the lock, she turned it until a click was heard. Slowly, Chiaki opened the door to see a moderate-sized room filled with an assortment of items.

"Well…this is interesting," stated Chisa, walking into the room. She went to a picture frame sitting on a nearby desk. After examining it for a second, the housekeeper handed it to her former student. "Do you know what this is?"

Chiaki grabbed the picture and studied it. A grown man and woman were standing behind two identical looking young girls. They were all smiling, and a ragged house could be seen in the background. One of the young girls had jet-black hair, and the other's was scarlet. When Chiaki looked at the red-haired girl, she felt a strange sense of recognition.

"Ms. Yukizome…who are these people?"

"That is a picture of Junko Enoshima and Mukuro Ikusaba with their parents."

The gamer gasped when she was told what this picture was showing. If Chisa was being honest, then this was a picture of a young Junko and Mukuro. The two sisters looked no older than ten. Their house and clothes would suggest they were relatively poor. Knowing the flamboyant Junko Enoshima came from such a humble background was unexpected.

"You're a sharp girl, Chiaki. Take a guess of what this room is."
Upon looking around at the toys and trinkets littered around the floor, she found a music box on
the ground and opened it. A ballerina popped out before a soft, yet eerie tune began to play. Chiaki
had a good idea what this room was. "This room contains objects from Junko's childhood…"

When it was announced to everyone else what the room contained, Kyoko wanted to investigate it
—immediately. The detective examined everything she could get her hands on and requested only
a few people be in the room at a time. She found things such as old clothes, notebooks, and
pictures. While the search continued, Kyoko spotted Chisa looking at what appeared to be a
sketchpad.

"Did you find something?" asked Kyoko.

"Oh, just an old sketchbook," answered Chisa, revealing it to the detective. "If this really is Junko's,
her art could've used some improvement." Kyoko didn't notice the crumpled up piece of paper
hidden behind Chisa's back. I think I'll keep this to myself.

"So," began Ruruka, who happened to walk in, "aren't we gonna address the fat elephant in the
room?"

"I'm sure you'll do that for us, Ando," replied Chisa.

"Don't pretend like you don't notice. A room full of stuff belonging to Enoshima…and the person
meant to enter was Nanami? Why would Enoshima want Nanami, of all people, to come here?
Doesn't this prove the two were in contact at some point?"

Chiaki assumed Chisa would interject, but Makoto beat her to it. "Don't you think that's a little
unfair? It does look weird, but there's no way—"

"No, it's strange," cut in Kyoko, who was examining something. "This room contains objects
regarding Junko Enoshima herself, and someone told that maid to specifically ask for Nanami. Not
only did someone want her to see this room, they knew she would be coming here."

Kyoko didn't bother to look up from what she was doing, while her statements caused an awkward
silence in the room. The gamer thought it was strange how Chisa still remained hushed throughout
all of this.

Finally, Aoi addressed Kyoko. "Kirigiri, don't you think that's harsh? I know you're a detective, but
suspecting Nanami is—"

"I didn't say that," interjected Kyoko. "We have no idea who wanted Nanami to come here because
the maid never gave a name. It might be Takara trying to play a trick. There could be some secret
collusion but, as of right now, I don't suspect Nanami of anything. Besides, she'd be smart enough
not to come here with all of us present, I'd assume."

Chiaki, Makoto, and Aoi all smiled at the assuring detective. Even Chisa could be heard giggling a
bit.

Ruruka, meanwhile, was struggling to think of how she could recover from this. "...Well, of
course! It's not like I actually thought our savior could be lying. I was just testing all your
loyalties." The confectioner put her face uncomfortably close to the gamer. "You can thank me
later for another favor I did for you!"

"Um…okay?"

"What a nasty woman…” Aoi murmured under her breath.
"Attention, idiotic Future Foundation agents!" Kitta yelled through the speaker. "Please make your way to the magnificent ballroom! I'm sure you came across a pair of huge metal doors you couldn't open, right? Come quickly... I'm not patient!" After a few seconds of silence, it appeared Kitta had nothing to add.

Chisa had an unreadable expression while she crossed her arms. "Let's go meet our host, shall we?"

The orders for everyone to gather near the previously locked doors were given. As Kitta said, they opened easily and revealed a long hallway. The tension could be cut with a butter knife while they began traversing through the empty passageway. Everyone was on guard for any ambush the ringleader might've planned.

The group finally arrived at another pair of doors. Once these were opened, only darkness was on the other side. Everyone hesitantly walked into the dark room, looking for any clue as to what this area could be.

"Light's on!" yelled Kitta before bright lights shined overhead, revealing a massive ballroom that was meant for a large audience.

There was, indeed, a surprising sight waiting for them inside.

"Holy cow!" yelled Aoi, getting into a martial arts pose, which wasn't that good.

The reason for her shock, along with all of her fellow agents, was the long line of Despairs standing across the room. They were all wearing fancy attire, held firearms, and were equipped with the signature Monokuma headgear. All of them stood side-by-side, unmoving. Their lack of reaction and movement seemed almost inhuman.

"...Talk about a party," murmured Ruruka, hiding behind Sonosuke.

"If we engage them," began Sonosuke, reaching for his knives, "it'll be a bloodbath."

"Did you all noticed my faithful servants?" asked Kitta, who still hadn't shown up in person.

"How could we not!" yelled Aoi. "Are you scared to come out?"

"I'm further in the back, behind those red doors you see behind my servants. I'm on a much more... fitting stage."

"You're just going to sacrifice all your allies while you hide?" asked Makoto with an angry expression.

"Not quite, you little dweeb. As easy and fun it would be for me to kick back and watch you all tear each other apart in a storm of gunfire, I have something much more gratifying in mind. Cleaning up all that blood would be a pain. The maintenance in this place isn't cheap, let me tell you."

"This mingling is fun," began Chisa, "but what is it you're after, Takara? Naegi?"

"I was really tempted to change my mind and pick him—but no. Today's guest of honor is none other than the phony savior, Chiaki Nanami!"

"...Why me?"

"Because I hate your existence the most out of anyone present! Now, let me offer you all a
preposition: have the phony savior walk through those red doors and face me—and me alone. Whichever one of us comes out gets to decide what happens. If she wins, my servants will stand down and your infiltration of Junko's castle will be a success! If I win, I'll kill her, hang her corpse on that flag above the castle, and you all can have your little gunfight in here! Although, I might borrow Makoto Naegi as well if I'm feeling frisky."

"...If we refuse?" asked Kyoko.

"It'll be open season, and you all can go die for all I care!" aggressively yelled Kitta. "If you don't want more dead bodies of your Future Foundation subordinates—send me the phony savior! This is the least you could do after the Despairs wasted those pathetic agents during the ambush! If there is no decision in five minutes, or you all try to leave this room—I'll give the order to fire!"

"We're not going to send her in there alone...are we?" asked a worried Makoto.

"She probably has Despairs waiting to kill her behind those doors!" exclaimed Aoi. "We can't trust her word!"

"If what we're seeing is all of them, we have the superior numbers," began Kyoko, "but there will still be many fatalities...even if we are victorious."

"Damn it," grunted Ruruka. "This is your fault, Yukizome! I told you we should've just annihilated this place, and now we're stuck in this mess! What do you have to say!" Chisa seemed to be looking off into space. "Hello!"

"This is pointless," responded the housekeeper. She then turned towards Chiaki. "What do you want to do?"

"..." Everyone had been so busy deliberating among themselves, the quiet gamer had gone unacknowledged. Now, all the attention was firmly on her. Chiaki's eyes were glued to the ground while she searched for her response. Regardless of the terrible feeling in her gut, she knew her answer. "If it helps save people...I'll do it."

"B-But...Boss," began Aoi, "it'll be like throwing you into a pool of sharks. She probably has like, a hundred more Despairs surrounding her."

"You have my word that it's just me," replied Kitta. "You might not think so, but I always honor my deals. All I want is a good old-fashioned confrontation against the phony savior."

"Oh, please!" yelled Ruruka. "As if we'd—"

"I think she's telling the truth," cut in Makoto. There was a collective gasp from the room after he spoke that.

The confectioner, looking beside herself, yelled, "Have you lost your mind! What kind of Ultimate Hope would trust some insane bitch over his own allies?"

"I know how crazy it sounds, but I don't think she would lie about wanting to go against Nanami by herself."

"I agree with Makoto," added Kyoko. "From what we know about Kitta, she prides herself on being superior to others. If she resorted to underhanded tactics to defeat the former Ultimate Gamer, who has already overcome her precious Despara Carnival, that would be a blow to her pride...and Junko's legacy. What would Enoshima think if her successor was too afraid to personally defeat a mere game enthusiast? Do you agree, Kitta Takara?"
There was no reply from the speakers. It wasn't a sure thing, but Kitta was likely still listening.

*If Takara was lying, thought Sonosuke, it would validate everything Kirigiri just said. From what I know, Kirigiri's deduction is spot on. She's someone who's always trying to prove her worth while disregarding rationality and sanity. She probably won't try anything now, even if she was planning something. That was a smart move to say it out loud like that.*

"If I may," began a young man who was a part of Sakakura's division, "you're feat during the Despara Carnival was inspiring. There would've been many more dead bodies if you hadn't acted. We're not all from the same division, but I think I speak for all of us low-ranking agents when I say—we trust you with this task."

There were no looks of disagreement from any of them. They all gave her looks of trust she hadn't received in this quantity before.

"Hehe," laughed Aoi. "I still don't trust Takara, but I have faith in you. Go kick her crazy ass, Boss!"

"Just from what I've seen," began Kyoko, "I'm confident in leaving this to you."

"Yeah," added Makoto, "you'll do fi—" He stopped when his earpiece fell out. He sighed before picking it up. "Just my luck to get a broken earpiece..."

Chiaki had no idea why that made the idea she was having take form—but she widened her eyes when it did. It might've been pointless, but she decided to follow her gut. She made sure to keep her voice low so Kitta wouldn't overhear. "Ms. Yukizome, would it be possible for a single-channel connection between just us to be made? It needs to stay open, constantly."

"Huh?" questioned Aoi. "Why would you—"

"It can be done," answered a smiling Chisa. "Why would you need such a thing?"

"...Just a feeling."

Chiaki looked straight into her former teacher's eyes. The housekeeper laughed under her breath before reaching into her coat pocket. She pulled out two earpieces and handed one to Chiaki. "Luckily, we made sure to bring some of these too. I don't know what you have in mind…but I'll trust your judgment. We are telling you to go headfirst into an incredibly dangerous situation for our sake."

"Thanks." Chiaki put her earpiece in before walking forward. The moment she arrived at the line of servants, they split apart enough for her to get through. The gamer walked past them and headed towards the red doors.

"A brave decision, phony savior," uttered Kitta. "The next voice you all hear through the speakers in the ballroom, after those red doors close, will be the victor! Make sure to stay tuned and place your bets accordingly! Spoiler: I'm the safe bet, haha!"

Chiaki ignored the idol's repugnant behavior and put her hand on the handle. She took one last look at all of her allies' reassuring looks.

"Good luck, Nanami!" yelled Ruruka. In her mind, she was completely freaking out and thinking about how she could get out of this. *She is so gonna die...*

With one last smile, Chiaki opened the doors to reveal a long, dark hallway. She walked through
the doorway before they shut on their own, eliminating her source of light.
Bright lights turned on overhead, revealing a long, barren hallway. Chiaki saw nothing irregular, so far. The only oddity was the unusually narrow hallway. There was no sign of the crude idol.

"It's just you and me now," stated Kitta through the speakers. "You'll have to prance along a bit further to find me."

The gamer didn't see much of an option but to begin walking.

"Hmm, no enthusiastic speech about how you're going to defeat me and save everyone?" When Chiaki gave no response, Kitta giggled. "Fine, I'll talk. I was on the precipice of becoming the heir to Daddy's fortune...until that whore, Sayaka Maizono, was unjustly gifted my title."

*Sayaka Maizono?* thought Chiaki, recalling that name. She was a victim of the killing game. She's why Takara was in the Reserve Course...?

"Needless to say, Koichi Kizakura is on my list too. You could never understand the embarrassment I felt. My fans shunned me, and my family laughed at my very name. However, there was one person who could see my beautiful light clearly—Junko Enoshima. Even when everyone shunned me, she stood by my side. She loved me for who I was."

"You're wrong," countered Chiaki.

"...What?"

In reality, Chiaki had no idea what the relationship between the two chaotic girls was like. She doubted Kitta would lie about being Junko's friend because the gamer didn't see a reason. Regardless, even though the two only talked for a short time, Chiaki felt like she knew Junko. If what she was feeling is accurate, it's possible for Kitta to be telling the truth while still being wrong.

"She was just using you. All that mattered is what you could do for her. Junko didn't care about your feelings at all, probably."

For a few seconds, there was a deafening silence. Chiaki wondered what kind of face the ringleader was making right now.

"Ha...hahaha! Look at the phony savior trying to be a people person and understand others feelings! As if a recluse like you could relate to our bond! I mean, all your friends are digital—so it makes sense!"

Chiaki knew her assertion would be dismissed by Kitta, but she wanted to try.

"I never expected the pure, virtuous savior would try playing mind games. Have I misjudged you, Chiaki Nanami? If your existent didn't piss me off, I'd offer you a job."

Chiaki arrived at a spiral staircase that went down a good distance. She began to descend.

"You're getting warmer, phony savior. Soon, you'll suffer in ways you can't even comprehend. To
make it even better, I'll barely have to move a muscle. It's all thanks to the weapon Enigma gave me."

_Him again?_ thought Chiaki, remembering the masked man.

The gamer shoved that weird man out of her mind once she reached the bottom of the stairs. In front of her lied a pair of doors, which likely held Kitta behind them. If her heart wasn't beating so fast, she might've enjoyed how this situation was similar to the calm before a boss fight. Although, the gamer knew there would be no save points or extra lives to rescue her from death.

"You've arrived at the doors? If so, there's on last deal I want to offer you."

_A deal?_

"What I want is simple: disavow the Future Foundation and walk away. I'll personally make sure you live, but the others will still die. Why should you have to risk your life for their sake? Take it from someone who's been around big organizations and bureaucrats all her life; they're no better than the Despairs they cut down. What do you say?"

Chiaki ignored Kitta's transparent ploy. Even if she was being truthful, the gamer wanted none of it. She'd already decided not to let others suffer because of her own follies. She breathed in, turned the handle, and walked into the room ahead. The minute she stepped in, her eyes were met with another dark place.

"Hola," greeted Kitta, her voice echoing.

There were a few things to note about this room. It was dark except for two spotlights that were positioned on Chiaki and Kitta. The gamer could tell the area was humongous by the way Kitta's voice echoed, and the ringleader was at least fifty meters from her. Kitta was wearing a similar outfit to what she had at the Despara Carnival, but now she had a stylish pair of pink triangle glasses and large headphones around her neck.

"You didn't take the bait. You're sharp, phony savior. I just wanted to experience the joy of seeing someone like you turn her back on allies and run like a coward. But, I guess you're a fool through and through."

"…What is this room?"

"This room is the stage where the rich, beautiful, and radiant idol will face the pitiful, average, and dull gamer. I talked Junko into having this built for me."

Despite the eeriness, the gamer still had an unrelated question. "Why did you want me to see that place?"

"What place?"

"That room filled with Junko's belongings from her past."

Chiaki couldn't see Kitta's facial expression, but she seemed genuinely confused. "What the hell are you going on about? Trying to play mind games? If so, do yourself a favor and quit because you're no good at it."

_She doesn't know…_ concluded Chiaki.

"Whatever you're trying to do, it doesn't matter." The idol outstretched her arms while a wide grin
appeared. "Take pride in knowing the ringleader and Junko's successor has chosen you! By all accounts, my existence is the closest thing to Junko Enoshima…and I'll prove it by throwing you into an abyss of despair!"

It was difficult to see, but Chiaki spotted a remote in the ringleader's hand. Suddenly, blinding lights shined from above, which revealed what the large room really was—a huge runway that looked like it belonged in a fashion show. The runway itself was elevated a few feet from the ground.

Chiaki's eyes could barely stay in one place. The long, silver runway lead all the way to Kitta. Humongous television screens were ingrained in the walls on the sides and at the top of the runway, admittedly catchy pop music played, and the area was bombarded by flashing multi-colored lights.

Things only grew stranger from there.

"Are those...mannequins?" Chiaki said to herself. She looked down at all the motionless bodies filling the seats. They all had their hands up in a clapping pose, and their faces were filled with plastic glee.

"Do you like my lovely audience?" asked Kitta, flashing her pearly white teeth. "I had many of my previous victims' likenesses made into mannequins. Just over there is my father and siblings. This way, their appreciation of me can last for all eternity!" The ringleader laughed in a ruthless tone. "Cool, right?"

Chiaki grimaced at the morbid display. If there was any hope in her that Kitta could be persuaded to stop, it crumbled upon seeing how depraved she was. It was unclear rather this was her true self or a result a Junko's influence. Still, it was obvious this woman was out of her mind. Chiaki wanted to hurry and end this; however, there was something else worth heeding.

"Oh," began Kitta, "have you noticed my pretty girl?" Just behind Kitta was a huge mechanical object. It was a huge robot that looked to be fifteen feet tall. Weirdly, it looked to be made in the image of an opera singer. "Her name is Persephone, and she's just adorable. When you're rich, you can get shit like this."

The gamer placed her hand on VEIL's touchscreen, immediately. The Despairs had utilized robotic warfare before, which have taken the lives of many agents and civilians. If that mechanical behemoth was a weapon, Chiaki knew she was in deep trouble.

"Cool your jets, phony savior. Persephone was designed to be nothing more than an aesthetic piece to keep in the background. I recently had her refurbished to serve...a different purpose. If you were worried it'd shoot bullets or something, then chill. Although, after you experience what she really does—you might wish you could have a quick death."

Chiaki wondered what was the best way to press forward. Her target was dead ahead, but she knew the ringleader had something planned.

"All you have to do to beat me—is to reach me. But the question remains..." Kitta pressed a button on the remote before sliding the headphones over her ears. "Can you reach me!"

The music shut off, ushering an uncomfortable second of silence. Next, the most atrocious sound the gamer had ever heard erupted from the mouth of Persephone. At the same time, ungodly images of unspeakably cruel events played on all the giant screens. Since she was so used to it, Chiaki knew what was happening.
A brainwashing video!

"Haha, enjoy your chasm of despair, phony savior!"

I need to get out of here!

Chiaki ran towards the door and tried to open it. No matter how hard she attempted, it wouldn't open. She activated VEIL and tried to force it open with her strengthened hand. Even then, it still refused to budge.

"It's useless!" yelled a voice not belonging to Kitta.

Chiaki, who recognized the voice, slowly turned her head. The sight she saw made ice flow through her veins and her heart skip a beat. Instead of Kitta, the diva of despair herself stood across from her. This was a completely different sensation from the imaginary form of Junko she would see during her recovery. Even though she knew this was an effect of the video, the incredible realism made fear pierce her like a lance.

"You only have two options," Junko announced in a flamboyant voice. "Either reach me and take the remote…or fall into despair! Make your choice, nobody!"

The gamer could feel her sense of self erode by the second. Given the vanity of it all, Junko might as well have been a continent away. Even so, Chiaki knew the only way out of this was to reach her. Using whatever resistance she built up from her training sessions, she slowly walked towards Junko.

What's the point?

It was as if she was encased in quicksand. Her mind drifted off like a satellite connection that kept going out. She could practically hear the static playing in her ears. If it wasn't for the exposure Chisa made her go through, she would have gone under long ago. Her pessimism only grew stronger.

Why even bother?

"That's it, savior!" boasted Junko. "You're doing fantastic! No seriously, if you keep this pace up—you'll reach me in about a hundred years!"

I wanna die.

Chiaki fell to her knees as her conviction continued to dwindle. Getting to her feet seemed impossible, so she settled for crawling. She knew giving in meant it was over.

"I know this is a bad time," began Junko, "but this is making me nostalgic. It's like your wonderful execution all over again! The futility combined with your wavering spirit crumbling before my eyes! You could just die and end your pain…but you agonizingly struggle onward because of some naive sense of responsibility and self-gratification! Your despair, truly, is unlike any other!"

There is no hope.

The gamer collapsed on her stomach when her knees gave out. Her recumbent form continued to claw her way towards Junko. Chiaki didn't know when or why, but a thick fog began to engulf the room. She couldn't spare any of her remaining sanity to acknowledge it. The pieces that made her whole began to unravel while the enemy she can never overcome gawked at her.
There is only despair.

"Tch," scoffed Junko, making an expression filled with disappointment and aloofness. "After all this time, you still can't reach me. How...underwhelming. Goodbye, Chiaki Nanami."

Everyone, sorry...

VVV

Nobody

Chiaki was standing while she looked around. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but a dense fog. She didn't know her location or how she ended up here. The last thing she remembered was facing Junko and then...nothing. Not knowing what else to do, she decided to walk. While she traversed the fog, a voice that seemed to come from everywhere constantly spoke.

Insignificant.

The girl kept looking for any sign of life, making her empty eyes scan left and right. She was ready to give up until a new sound was heard. After walking towards the noise, she spotted a scene in the fog. It was like watching a scene that had been cut out and placed in front of her.

"Haha, it's the loner girl!" laughed a young kid with a bunch of others joining in. They were on a playground and were directing their comments towards a young girl on a swing.

"..." The young girl didn't pay them any attention. She merely rocked back and forth while keeping her eyes on the game she was playing.

Waste of space

Chiaki walked away from the display, not wanting to observe it anymore. After more walking, she stumbled upon another scene. The same young girl she saw earlier walked into a moderate-sized house. She stepped into a kitchen where a young woman was writing on some papers. Based on her features, it was safe to assume they were mother and daughter. The only differences were the mother's short, dark-colored hair was much more straight, and her eyes were dark brown.

"You're late again, Chiaki," said the woman, who didn't bother to look away from her work. "I don't mind you spending time with Noriko, but tell her I want you back sooner from now on."

"...I'm sorry." The young girl looked unsure for a moment before speaking in a wispy voice. "Um, can I still get that game because I passed my exam?"

"Ugh," grunted Chiaki's mother, putting a palm on her forehead. She seemed more angry at herself than her daughter. "I've been so busy with work that it slipped my mind. I won't be able to get it this weekend because I'm a bit tight on money, so I'll make a note to get it next week."

Chiaki looked to the side before facing her mother again. "Do you want to play something together?"

"I'm much too preoccupied. Honestly, Chiaki, you're not a toddler anymore. Don't you think it's about time you quit those games and focused on your studies? You're so bright, you could get into Tokyo University if you applied yourself. I want you to start looking into more productive hobbies, alright? High school is coming up, and you need to decide what you want to pursue."

"...Yes, mother."
"I'll bring dinner up when it's done. Also, I'll be away for a few days starting tomorrow. Make sure to follow the usual rules when I'm gone."

Throughout that exchange, Chiaki's mother never looked at her daughter once.

_Unwanted_

The current Chiaki walked away from the scene and grabbed her head. It didn't come to her at first, but she knew what those scenes she witnessed were.

_Ah, that's right. Those were my memories. Why am I seeing this…?_

Another scene formed in the fog. This time, Chiaki didn't recognize the memory.

"Morning, class!" greeted Chisa to the seventy-seventh class. "Time to take attendance." The warm housekeeper proceeded to read the names of everyone. As always, all of her students were present. Well…mostly all of them. "Hmm? Does anybody know where our cute little class rep is?"

"She probably wandered off while playing that damn game again," commented Fuyuhiko, with his legs propped up. "That, or she overslept."

"If you all would like," began Peko, getting up from her seat, "I can go retrieve her."

"No need!" exclaimed Ibuki. "Ibuki's amazing ears can hear familiar footsteps approaching!"

Just as the musician said, someone appeared at the door. Upon looking at the scene, Chiaki wasn't sure how to process it. The person wore her clothes, had her game console, and was even adorning her hair clip. By all accounts, it should've been Chiaki Nanami at the doorway.

Nonetheless, it wasn't.

"My bad!" greeted Junko, making a smile that was out of character. "I overslept again!"

"Oh, you," stated Chisa. "You're lucky you're such a cinnamon roll."

"Ah," fawned Nagito. "Everyone was so hopeful once you walked in; your hope really is the most beautiful."

"Eww," grunted Hiyoko, who was weirded out by Nagito, as usual. "Ms. Yukizome, Komaeda is acting weird again!"

"By the way," began Sonia, looking at Junko with joy, "will you be joining us later on? We will be partaking in a terrifying horror movie!"

"I'd love to, but I've already made plans with someone."

Chiaki looked away from the repugnant sight of her former classmates gushing over the fake fashionista. She walked away, only for another scene to appear. She saw the all too familiar scenery of a boy sitting on a bench in front of a fountain. He wore a melancholic expression and seemed to be waiting for someone.

"Sorry I'm late," Junko apologized before taking a seat next to the boy. "I had to take care of something. Did anything exciting happen today, Hinata?"

"Nah, the Reserve Course was boring, like always," Hajime answered. "It's nice that you're here now, though."
"Hehe, what game do you want to play today? I've bought a bunch from my dorm."

"How about a game I can actually beat you in? Granted, I don't think I could ever beat an Ultimate."

"What did I tell you about putting yourself down like that? It doesn't matter who wins or loses. At least we're having fun."

"Yeah, you're absolutely right. You always know exactly what to say. I guess…it's why I like spending so much time with you."

Junko's cheeks brightened after that comment. "I feel the exact same."

"Enough!" exclaimed Chiaki, running from the horrific fabrication. She dashed through the fog, looking for any kind of reprieve from this nightmare.

Eventually, she ran into a hard object. It was a huge wall made of glass that appeared out of thin air. The gamer pressed her forehead to the glass—her spirit was in shambles.

"Please," the gamer said to nobody in a weak voice, "I don't want to go through this anymore. This despair… I want it to stop."

"Somebody…help me. I just want the pain to go away…"

Chiaki, still with her forehead leaning on the glass, saw her reflection. Just when she thought things couldn't get more outlandish, her reflection seemed to move on its own.

"If you want the pain to leave," began Chiaki's reflection with an empty look, "then walk away from this. Just give in."

"…I can't do that. If I abandon everyone—"

"What's the point? Ever since we were little, we were ridiculed for just being us. When we try to help others, we just end up being the ones to suffer. Why should we give our all to people who never give us anything in return? The more we try…the more we hurt."

"…"

"All of our pain is the result of other people. We decided to reject both hope and despair, didn't we? Well…if we walk away, we'll be free of our agony. I think it's time we pull the plug—end this game of misery, once and for all."

As if the sun had fallen from the sky, a blinding light appeared behind the gamer. It was hard to make out, but she could see someone's silhouette. The figure looked like a woman's, and her arm was stretched out towards her.

"An angel…?" said Chiaki.
"Chiaki," said the mysterious woman, "if you want the despair to end—take my hand."

As if she was hypnotized by the luminescence, Chiaki legs started moving towards it. "It's so warm…"

"That's right, my dear. You're almost there."

"The pain is fading…"

"Yes, Chiaki. Just let go."

"I'm almost there…" Chiaki was on the precipice of reaching the light. She could feel her body and mind fade while she got closer. More and more, the gamer was starting to feel nothing but pure apathy. "Nothing matters… Trying your best for others is meaningless…"

"Do you really mean that?" asked a new voice, which made Chiaki halt her advance.

"Huh?" Chiaki looked around and saw nothing. It was like that feminine voice came from inside her head.

"Oh good; my voice finally got through. Just think of me as your conscience. Since you can hear me, I guess you aren't entirely lost."

"No... I don't want to fight anymore. Helping others just brings more pain. No matter how hard I tried, it didn't matter."

"Chiaki, all this time…and you still don't understand."

"…What do you mean?"

"There is no such thing as a selfless act in this world. Human beings are much too envious in nature for that. Even the most virtuous acts can never truly be selfless. Do you honestly think the happiness you shared with the seventy-seventh class and Hinata held no benefit for you?"

"I got closer to Hinata and helped the class because Ms. Yukizome said to—""

"However, you did get something out of the deal. You got to experience affection, friendship, and your talent's usefulness was validated. In other words, you had finally received acknowledgment; you had gotten all the love and appreciation that had been deprived of you for all those years. That doesn't make the good deeds you did less benevolent, but you have to stop thinking it was pointless."

"…It still failed. Everyone had something bad happen to them."

"Still, can you say it would've been better if it never existed? Chiaki, can you truly say your life has been nothing but unlimited despair?"

"There were times I was happy, but…"

"Like you said, siding with only hope or despair is a mistake. Take all your joy and suffering…and use it to tear open a path to the future. Use that unique resolve as a blade, Chiaki, and shove it in the heart of your true source of despair—Junko Enoshima. You've gone through more strife than most could survive. It's for that reason…despair can never truly chain you down."

The gamer, with the words of the voice in her head sinking in, turned away from the light and faced her reflection again. Those memories of warmth seemed to be having a resurgence. She
didn't know where it was coming from, but it was like something had been sparked in her. She furrowed her brow when the face of her despair entered her mind. "How do I get out of this? The fog is so thick, and this barrier is blocking the way."

"The only person causing the fog is you, Chiaki. You already possess the ability to shatter this hold despair has on you. Use that same resolve Junko Enoshima feared and Izuru Kamakura sought—break through it."

Chiaki walked to where her reflection was and stared back at it.

"This is all pointless," her reflection said. "You need to let go."

"...If I just do it," murmured Chiaki while she put her hand on the glass and pushed. The glass broke seamlessly, allowing her to advance. Immediately, after that, another barrier appeared.

"All your efforts will never be acknowledged."

"If I just do it." She broke that barrier as easy as the first one.

"You shouldn't even be alive. You'll never be able to match Junko no matter how many times you come back."

"If I just do it." This glass broke easily as well.

"You're classmates all love Junko more than you."

"If I just do it." Another glass shatters.

"Hajime Hinata never cared about you."

"If I just do it." Her touch shatters another barrier.

"The Future Foundation will always consider you a joke."

"If I just do it." That barrier was the next to fall.

"Why won't you just quit?" asked her reflection, who looked sad. "What's the point of trying our best when despair will be waiting? It's all futile, like a game that's rigged against you. This world never wanted us in the first place. So...why do you keep moving forward when it doesn't even matter?"

"...Because," began Chiaki, placing her hand on the mirror, "it'll work out."

Just like that, the glass broke. The fog began to dissipate, and Chiaki could no longer feel any pain. Just across from her was Junko, who directly stared into her eyes. The diva had a phlegmatic expression, making it hard to guess what she was thinking. The gamer ran at her before snatching the remote out of her grip. Surprisingly, Junko made no attempt to resist. The two stood with their backs facing each other.

"Not choosing either side..." stated Junko in a toneless voice. "Disgusting. Still, it allowed you to reach me. In the end, this level of despair wasn't enough. How...fascinating."

Chiaki didn't know what expression the mastermind was making, nor did she care. Instead, the gamer observed the remote and pressed the buttons to turn off the brainwashing. In the blink of an eye, reality shifted back to Kitta's runway. The televisions had been shut off, and Persephone had ceased her egregious screeching. Chiaki wiped her face, with it being covered in tears, before
turning around to see Kitta's stunned form.

"W-what...?" The ringleader had removed her glasses, making her expression visible. Chiaki had never had anyone gaze at her the way Kitta was. The ringleader stared at her like she was some kind of monster. "T-that's impossible..."

"Takara," began Chiaki, taking a step forward.

"Stay back!" she yelled, hastily crawling back and cowering. "Get away from me, you fucking freak! You're not even a human being!"

Chiaki averted her eyes before looking at the remote. She found the button for the speakers and prepared to talk.

VVV

The vespertine atmosphere did little to soothe the tension in the ballroom. The Future Foundation and Despairs maintained their stand-off, waiting for the results of Chiaki and Kitta's clash. No one dared to make ill-advised moves and patiently waited.

At last, after about a half-hour, they heard a voice play through the speakers.

"Takara has been stopped," announced Chiaki, to which the Future Foundation agents gasped. "The doors are opened so, um...you can arrest her."

"Ha!" laughed Aoi, jumping up and down in joy. She grabbed Makoto and made him join in. "I knew she could do it!"

"Y-yeah!" agreed an already tired Makoto.

"That little dweeb actually pulled it off!" thought a flabbergasted Ruruka. In her typical fashion, she placed hands on her hips while putting on airs. "I told you all she could do it! Never doubt my intuition!"

Even Kyoko couldn't help but smile in relief. She gazed over at Chisa, who secluded herself in the corner of the ballroom. She quietly sat in a chair with her leg crossed. The detective couldn't see it clearly from where she was at, but the housekeeper looked to have a faint smile.

"They're..." began Sonosuke, noticing the Despairs' sudden movement. In congruence with each other, they all put their weapons down and got on their knees.

"They really gave up," stated Kyoko. "It seems like Takara was being honest. Perhaps, her being beaten was so unthinkable, she didn't care either way?"

"Whatever the reason," began Chisa, walking up to the group, "they appear to be yielding. It seems this mission is over. Arrest them all, immediately!"

VVV

"T-this is a mistake..." muttered Kitta in disbelief. "Was it defective? No, I tested it on multiple people, and I had results every time I used it. How did I lose to her a second time...? How is it possible for someone to resist what they're brain is telling them?"

"Takara," began Chiaki, "it's over now. You're going to answer for everything you've done."

"...Look at the phony savior, talking all high and mighty." Kitta pulled out a gun she was
"Don't screw with me!"

Chiaki quickly activated VEIL, making the electromagnetic field shield her from bullets.

"Haha…what a dumb device." The ringleader tossed the gun like it was a piece of trash. She frowned while her head began to throb. The voices of all those that admonished and shunned her began to play. It was like all her past faults were attacking in the form of the gamer standing across from her. "You all think I'm horrible…but it's the world's fault. A world that forces those without a talent to crawl in the dirt—it should burn!"

Chiaki closed her eyes. She didn't think it would help, but she figured one last chance at diplomacy was worth a shot.

"I can understand your feelings a little since I didn't get the acknowledgment I wanted for a long time. It's something that affects everyone, talent or not. Instead of focusing all your hate on people who look down on you, doing your best for the people who still admired you is what you should've done. Not having a talent didn't make you a horrible person. Hurting people and turning your back on the ones that liked you—that made you a horrible person, I think."

The gamer could hear the demented ringleader gnashing her teeth. Kitta dug and scratched her nails into her arm so roughly, it left a nasty wound. Then, in an explosion of rage, she pulled out a knife and ran at the gamer. "Shut up!"

Chiaki wasn't impressive from a physical perspective, but the training she went through at the Future Foundation put her above someone like Kitta. Add the fact Kitta was sloppily flailing around, Chiaki could easily avoid any injury without the help of VEIL. She remembered worse in the sessions Chisa made her go through. Her calm demeanor seemed to only make the ringleader angrier.

"Don't talk like you can understand people's feelings, you freak! The only person that could understand me was Junko!"

"All Junko care about was herself. She was insane."

"Go to hell! You didn't know her like I did! What could someone like you know about it!"

Chiaki grabbed Kitta's wrist—the one on the side of her knife hand—and twisted while kicking one of the ringleader's legs from under her. The gamer obtained the knife, and Kitta went tumbling to the floor. Chiaki was ready to incapacitate her with VEIL; however, the gamer's expression softened when she saw her crying face. The whimpering sounds and the make-up running down her wet face, despite all that had happened, made Chiaki pity her.

"…I tried my hardest, and my talent still went ignored. Living in the shadow of others… It kills you as a person. I just want them all to die and suffer!"

The gamer made a sour face because this was making her uncomfortable. She didn't agree with Kitta's sentiments, but her ramblings reminded her too much of Hajime. The sad expression, the self-loathing, the need to be somebody at any cost… Chiaki wanted this moment to end.

"If you don't have a talent," began Kitta, pulling out another knife, "you might as well not exist!"

Kitta ran towards her again. Despite this, the gamer seemed to be paralyzed. It wasn't because of fatigue or any kind of trick. Simply, this ugly side of reality seemed to conjure an invisible bind on her. Throughout it all, she couldn't get Hajime out of her mind.
Before Kitta could cut her, a blade flew by Chiaki's face and knocked the weapon out of Kitta's grip. The ringleader gasped while stumbling backward, grasping her hand. Chiaki turned to see the attacker was Sonosuke. He seemed to have moved quickly enough to intervene, and quietly enough to not be heard.

Then, both of them turned to look at Kitta, who started maniacally laughing while clutching her knees.

"Hahaha! I get it now! This is all your plan, isn't it, Junko! You knew the amount of despair I'd feel from this! Yes, I get it, my best friend! I'll embrace it just like you taught me how! Despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, hahaha!"

Chiaki looked away, finding this meltdown hard to watch. Whatever semblance of sanity was left in the ringleader seemed to have vanished. In a twisted way, the gamer felt responsible. She reminded herself how Kitta needed to be stopped, making the bad feeling fade.

"She would have really killed you if I didn't interfere," stated Sonosuke, gathering the still jabbering Kitta. "Remember that the next time you try to show compassion for filth like this." The blacksmith walked away with Kitta while she still continued to inhumanly laugh.

The gamer was left alone on the stage, with peaceful silence ensuing. She narrowed her eyes, feeling as if this victory was bittersweet. Regardless, for the first time in a long time, she held her head up high. She had overcome the malevolent ringleader and, at least for today, despair had not beaten her. It felt like it had taken forever, but she finally earned a victory over despair and—in relation, Junko Enoshima.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

1. The final part of the arc is next as we're about to delve into the second part of this phase and… oh boy, does something game-changing happen.

2. The University of Tokyo is regarded as the most prestigious college in Japan. Saying Chiaki had the potential to get in is supposed to signify her natural wits. Or perhaps her mom had high expectations? Maybe both.
Save the Echoes of Despair

Chapter Notes

Vixen7117 has a nice fanart on their Tumblr, which I will also leave a link for!

@nightangel0402.tumblr.com/image/165606861831

It was late in the afternoon while many Future Foundation vehicles were parked outside of Junko's castle. After Kitta's arrest, back-up arrived and assisted in the arrest of all Despairs present. Just as the ringleader had said, they did not resist.

The next order of business was to secure the entire castle and see if there was any information helpful to their cause. The brainwashing video had been decided to be brought in and studied; it existence was to be kept under wraps until more was known about it—at least, that's what Chisa said.

All in all, the mission was a complete success.

"Hahaha!" menacingly laughed Kitta. The ringleader had been shoved and bound inside of a vehicle to be driven where a special transport was waiting. "Just you all wait; I have an idea even better than the Despara Carnival!"

Chiaki, glancing at the ringleader from a distance, couldn't help but stare. As cruel as she had been, it seemed like she maintained some sense of reason before. Now, she looked to be nothing more than a human who's completely fallen under despair's influence.

"Don't tell me you pity her," said Ruruka, approaching the gamer. "She tried to kill us."

Chiaki looked down before she said, "I know what she's done, but she's a product of Junko's manipulation. If they wouldn't have met...she might not be like this."

"You're wasting your sympathy." Unlike her usual lackadaisical attitude, the confectioner looked sincere. "That witch is nothing but trash. Everything she's done was her choice—does that sound like a victim of circumstance to you? In a way, it's like a badly made sweet."

"What does that mean?" asked Chiaki before Ruruka pulled out a cookie.

"When created right, anything can be beautiful. It takes preparation, dedication, and attentiveness. However—" Ruruka crushed the treat in her hand, making crumbs fall to the ground. "—just one mistake can make the whole foundation crumble. That's what the Despairs are: failed creations."

That's...thought Chiaki.

"Your job isn't to feel sorry for these freaks. If it was up to me...I'd order all them to be shot where they stood." Ruruka strolled away, laughing heartily. "Admittedly, the thought of that bitch rotting in a cell does put a smile on my face, though."

Chiaki glanced at Kitta one more time before walking to the stairs of the entrance and sitting. She
was exhausted from the myriad of hectic events: the performance enhancer, the clash against Kitta and the killers, and her mental duel against the despair video. It seemed like an eternity ago when the gamer would qualify playing five games in one sitting a busy day.

"Tired, my cinnamon roll?" asked Chisa, sitting next to her. "It's miraculous you're not dead."

"Thanks...I think?"

"Are you finally starting to believe it now—that you're the savior? Not only did you resist the video, you single-handily defeated the girl that was Junko's heir."

"...I'm not the savior. The reason I got through the brainwashing was you. That was your voice I heard."

"The moment you started mumbling incoherent things, I knew something happened. Even so, my voice was only able to get through because your mind didn't stop fighting. Guess those exposure sessions paid off, eh?"

Chiaki looked away, not wanting to admit she was right. It was inhumane, but there's no question that the exposure sessions saved her. It annoyed her how the housekeeper always seemed to prove herself right. The gamer doubted the savior title would ever stick, though.

"What did you see, exactly?" Chisa asked.

Chiaki didn't want to recall Junko's appearance, the familiar and fake memories, and her own reflection preaching nihilistic ideals to her. That person in the light... She remembered the mysterious silhouette she saw. Now that she thought about it, the shape reminded her of a certain someone.

"Let me guess: there were games everywhere, but you didn't have any fingers to play them with. Am I right, hehe?"

The gamer ignored the teasing while she said, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Whatever it was, it wasn't enough despair to overtake you. If you had to estimate, how potent do you think it was?"

"...Seventy percent, maybe. Her robot is what really made it worse."

"And do you feel well now? Being exposed that long could have a long-term effect."

"I have a headache, keep hearing this static sound, and it feels like I'll pass out at any time—besides that, I'm fine."

Chisa, taking note of her former students melancholy, said, "You triumphed over one of Junko's closest subordinates, yet you still look as blasé as ever."

"I'm happy we're alive, but...I don't know."

"Having trouble finding any meaning... I suppose it makes sense, all things considered."

Chiaki raised an eyebrow. "What does that—"

"Nothing, really," interrupted Chisa. "Why don't you rest for a bit? It'll be a while before our ride arrives."
With one last look of suspicion, the gamer left the housekeeper.

*This was a resounding victory,* thought Chisa, smiling. *What comes next? The housekeeper looked up at the orange sky. Upon observing this, what's going through your mind right now, I wonder…?*

VVV

A couple days had passed since the arrest of Kitta. It was good news how there were no casualties during the castle infiltration, but there were many dead as a result of the ambush and Despara Carnival. In total, eighty-nine lives were lost—not the worst event, but still a mournful loss.

As for Junko's castle, there hadn't been any information pertaining to the Remnants of Despair or any other major threat. A notable discovery was Junko's belongings; however, even that didn't have anything crucial. The brainwashing video was scavenged from a hard drive and sent to the research department in the Seventh Division.

Kitta was taken to a top-secret location to undergo interrogation. So far, talks had been unsuccessful because the ringleader had little semblance of sanity left. She would always opt to monolog about despair or her new idea for a despair-filled event. As Chairman Tengan ordered, she would not suffer the death penalty.

The ringleader was ruled to be imprisoned in solitary confinement for the rest of her days.

Enigma, effective immediately, has been placed on the Future Foundation's most wanted list. His takedown of Juzo, in addition to his clout with the Despairs, made him a person of interest. He was given the same level of notoriety as the Remnants and Black Rider.

Currently, in his office, Chiaki and Kyoko were giving a mandatory briefing to Kyosuke about the events that transpired on the mission. He already read the report, but he still requested a verbal retelling. Chiaki had purposefully left out the part about Enigma's interest in her and didn't go too in-depth about the brainwashing video.

After the duo finished, Kyoko said, "If I may, I would like to reiterate that I alone changed Sakakura's orders. I had pressured Nanami into following my whim. I take full responsibility."

Chiaki wanted to interject, but she caught a glance from Kyoko that signaled she didn't want her to interfere. She didn't mind sharing the blame, especially considering Kyoko—along with the rest of the survivors of the seventy-eight class—was part of an ongoing investigation into any possible connections with Junko.

"Even though your improvisation worked," began Kyosuke, looking at the detective, "you did, in fact, disobey direct orders. If it had gone awry, Takara would've escaped and Nanami could've died. It would set a bad precedent for others if I excused you because the worst didn't come to fruition. Do you understand, Kirigiri?"

"Yes, I'll accept all punishment."

Kyosuke shifted his look to Chiaki, which made her stiffen—as she always did with the vice chairman. *Am I going to get punished?* thought Chiaki. *Does he suspect something?*

"You're excused, Nanami," said Kyosuke. "I want to discuss matters with Kirigiri alone."

"Yes, sir." Chiaki walked away, thankful this didn't turn into an inquisition. Just as she turned around, however…
"Nanami," began Kyosuke, "one more thing."

"…Yes?" The gamer felt like she should be crossing her fingers.

"Not only did you disrupt the Despara Carnival and saved lives, you thwarted a high-level target on their own playing field. I've heard nothing but positive responses to your performance—a job well done."

Did he just…? Chiaki couldn't believe what she had heard. It was said formally, he had the same stern face, and he didn't sound impressed; however, it didn't change an important fact—he had praised her. Chiaki nearly asked Kyosuke to repeat himself in case she heard wrong.

"You have the rest of the week off to recover. That'll be all."

"Thank you, sir," Chiaki said before bowing. She tried to conceal it, but a smile escaped. The gamer received one last indifferent look from the vice chairman before walking out of the office.

Instantly, she was greeted by another individual.

"I take it they're having a private conversation?" asked the former Ultimate Affluent Progeny, Byakuya Togami.

Chiaki blinked before she said, "I think Kirigiri is going to get some kind of punishment. I hope she doesn't lose her division leader status…"

"Highly unlikely. If the offense I read is correct, she'll probably receive a few sanctions, for a time." He adjusted his glasses and had a look of annoyance. "That's also taking into account the vice chairman isn't big fans of ours."

Chiaki couldn't help but notice his demeanor. As expected of someone with his pedigree, there was a dignified aura around him. The gamer felt as if she should've bowed to him in respect. If there was a room filled with people, he would've stood out among them all. The only person the gamer met that had such a regal aura was Sonia.

"Will that be a problem?" Chiaki asked.

"It's more of an inconvenience for me. She had a big assignment coming up in Towa City, and now I'll have to take her place."

Towa City? thought Chiaki. Where have I heard that…?

Byakuya proceeded to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Damn it… I'll have to deal with her now…"

"Fukawa, you mean?" Toko's affection for Byakuya was well-documented because of her constant antics and pandering to him during the killing game—all the more so for Chiaki since Aoi would entertain her with stories of the mismatched duo.

He rubbed his forehead as if he was avoiding speaking the name. "One side is an unhinged, foul-mouthed, slob; the other is an obnoxious serial killer—two annoying haves that forms a loathsome whole."

"I don't support the murderer side because killing innocents is wrong. Though, I think there is something endearing about her affection…in a way. Being around you could make her fancier, with you being the Affluent Progeny, maybe."
He crossed his arms while a grin appeared. "If you honestly think that, then it appears the seventy-eight class wasn't the only one with a boundless optimist." Before the gamer could ask for elaboration, he walked off in the opposite direction. "I'll have to cut this chat short—I don't care to be in his company."

Chiaki, wondering what he was talking about, turned to see Chisa and Juzo coming her way. The housekeeper was all smiles while the boxer looked like a kid being forced to eat their vegetables. He had visible bandages over his body—as expected after the punishment he took during the mission. The gamer still couldn't wrap her head around the fact Enigma thoroughly beat him.

"Chiaki," began Chisa, "he has something to tell you."

"Uh…" Juzo had his eyes awkwardly cast on the ground. "You did kinda good out there with Takara and the Despara Carnival, so… Why the hell do I have to do this, Yukizome?"

"Because you wanted to express how grateful you are." Chisa grinned while giving an elbow to Juzo—an elbow that hit him in an injured rib. "Right…?"

"Alright, alright!" After wincing from Chisa persuasive nudge, he said, "You did pretty well, and I guess you aren't totally incompetent, I suppose."

"Hehe," laughed Chisa. "I fear that's as good as it'll get, my dear."

It was lackluster, but it was still praise. To have both Kyosuke and Juzo say nice things about her in one day was groundbreaking. She discreetly pinched herself to see if it was a dream. The gamer grimaced before smiling when she realized it wasn't. "Could there be a chance you'll treat Naegi nicer—"

Juzo intimidatingly glared. "Don't push it."

"Understood," she replied.

The boxer walked off with Chisa following. The housekeeper turned and said, "Asahina and Naegi want to see you in the lobby, by the way!" before disappearing behind a corner with her close friend.

Not having any other matters to attend to, she headed for the lobby. She took the elevator—an action she still hated doing—and arrived at the lobby within minutes. The area was, as usual, filled with many individuals conversing with each other. Ever since despair had been on the decline, all employees' spirits were higher. It seemed even more jubilant today Chiaki thought.

The gamer scanned around before spotting the duo near an indoor bench. They were having some small talk with one another before the swimmer saw her and waved.

"There she is!" exclaimed Aoi after her boss approached.

Makoto waved before he asked, "You two aren't in huge trouble, are you?"

"I'm fine, but I think Kirigiri is in trouble."

Aoi looked frustrated while giving a kick to a potted plant. "This stinks; we stopped Enoshima, and we get treated like the problem. Let's not forget that dumb investigation we're still under."

"It's hard," began Makoto, "but don't forget all the gratitude we've gotten. There are people who support us—people like Nanami."
Chiaki smiled. "I've been here longer, and I barely get taken seriously. I don't think that savior joke will ever go away."

"I say we form our own division," suggested Aoi. "Let's go and demand the chairman to create a super-exclusive branch, just for us! I'll volunteer to be the leader!"

"Ugh," said Makoto, uncomfortably smiling. "I don't know, Hina…"

"Getting the job the first time was scary enough," added Chiaki. "I don't wanna go through that again…"

"Excuse me…?" said a new voice.

The trio turned to see a young woman. She wore the business attire of the Future Foundation and had short brunette hair. Her lack of composure was apparent, and she was staring at Chiaki. In her nervousness, she kept sweeping her fingers over the rim of her jacket.

Chiaki, in a polite manner, asked, "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Well…I heard how you stopped the Despara Carnival. My little brother was a part of it, and you saved him." The woman took a deep breath before puffing out her chest and saluting. "Thank you so much, mam! I am a new recruit, and I plan on applying for your division!"

The gamer couldn't so much as make a comment before the woman ran off in a huff. She bumped several people in the lobby and fell over herself a few times before vanishing. …Is something in the water today?

"I've heard others mention you since getting back," said Makoto. "People really appreciated what you did."

"I guess." Chiaki flicked her pale-colored piece of hair before recalling a memory. "That woman was a lot like a rookie that was in my division. She was sent to Sakakura's division because of her interest in law enforcement. I can't remember her name…"

"Ms. Nanami," announced a middle-aged man, who had approached her. "Congratulations on the mission."

"Oh, thank you." The man politely shook her hand before leaving. The gamer turned to the smiling faces of Aoi and Makoto.

"Could it be the savior title isn't a joke after all?" rhetorically asked Aoi. "You're a rock star now, Boss!"

Chiaki tilted her head. So, it's like a game where I can increase my individual abilities. I wonder if I can improve my speech next?

"Well," began Makoto, standing up and straightening his tie, "I should get going. There's still some stuff I gotta do back at base."

The lucky student smiled when Aoi hugged him. "Make sure to keep in contact; tell that to grumpy Togami too!"

"Heh, will do." Makoto turned towards the gamer. "It was nice meeting you, Nanami. Thanks for saving all of us."
"I needed lots of help," she replied with her palms up. "If it means anything, I truly think you're Ultimate Hope. You gave me the idea to use the communication device. Your luck came through."

"Nah, Ultimate Hope should apply to anyone who fights for it—not just me, and my luck is awful. You being the savior—after everything you did—is something I believe."

"I don't think that's true because—"

"Okay!" interrupted Aoi, stunning Chiaki and Makoto. "You're both humble people; can we leave it at that before we're here long enough for the future to leave us behind?"

After a quiet second, the trio began laughing—delighting in the lightheartedness of the moment. Just a short time ago, they were face to face with death and despair. Now, they all could laugh at their own humble conversation.

Makoto, after one last chuckle, put on a more serious expression. "I hope the issue of your classmates gets resolved. As someone who's lost a lot of his—" Makoto stopped himself as he looked down, and Aoi did the same. "—I hope yours will be fine." The former Ultimate Lucky Student stuck out his hand.

"Yeah…" said Chiaki, shaking his hand. "I hope so too."

"Good luck, you two." Makoto smiled once more before departing.

Aoi stretched her limbs before she said, "I need to be on my way too. There's some work that needs finishing on my end."

"Really?" Chiaki and Chisa were going to be staying overnight to take care of some last minute errands. The gamer had assumed that Aoi would stay with her until their departure tomorrow morning.

"Yep, I'll see you when you get back." Aoi placed a hand on her boss's shoulders, in addition to a wink. "Look happier. You saved a lot of lives."

Chiaki nodded before Aoi took her leave. The gamer smiled, enjoying how pleasant the day was going. She hadn't remembered a day going this smoothly since her time at Hope's Peak Academy. It was still a stretch to say she was completely exuberant, but she couldn't help but enjoy the adulation coming her way.

"Nanami," said a feminine voice Chiaki heard next to her. She saw Kyoko had approached her. Despite being in trouble, she looked as composed as always.

"How did things go?" Chiaki asked.

"It's just a minor probation. I won't be able to do any detective work in the field for a while."

_Togami called it._ "I'm sorry the Future Foundation is giving you such a hard time. It's a little unfair how you're getting punished."

"No, as the vice chairman said, I did disobey orders. I expected this; however, I don't regret a single thing I did."

_Heh, she's always so sure of herself._ "You know, it might not be a good idea to talk in a public place like this. There could be more rumors…"
The detective smiled. "I couldn't care less about silly rumors, nor should you. Facts always end up speaking for themselves."

"That's it…" Chiaki tightened her palms and closed her eyes. She had the urge to do something she always wanted to try. It was a ritual that only happened in high school anime and visual novels she saw. At last, the opportunity had come for her to try it. She took in a deep breath, pointed at Kyoko, and yelled, "You're my rival!"

"Huh…?" It was a rare occurrence, but the detective didn't know what to do. She looked back with questioning eyes while onlookers were beginning to stare. Kyoko began to wonder if them speaking in public was a good idea after all—it always escalated in the strangest ways.

Chiaki, still pointing, felt her confidence waver. Did I do something wrong…? In games and television, when a girl secretly admires another, she declares them rivals until they inevitably become good friends—something along those lines, at least. Even so, Chiaki felt awkward and foolish when Kyoko stared back at her.

"Nanami…can you elaborate?" asked Kyoko.

"You're confident, sure of yourself, and it always seems like you know what to do. I want to be more like that. So—" Chiaki stared at her with conviction. "—I've made you my rival so I could be more like you. Do you accept?"

Kyoko unblinkingly looked at Chiaki before putting a palm over her mouth and giggling. Chiaki was puzzled because she didn't get what was funny about her proclamation. The gamer worried that her being a rival was too outlandish because of her inadequacy.

Finally, Kyoko said, "You watch too many stories. People, typically, don't do that."

"O-oh…"

"You're putting me on far too high a pedestal. I'm the one who's impressed by your accomplishments." The detective rested her chin on her hand. "I'll have to work harder if I hope to match the savior's acumen, my rival."

"Aww, now you're teasing me, Kirigiri?" It was hard for the gamer to imagine that she didn't care for Kyoko's company just a few days ago. Chiaki, finally, understood what Aoi was trying to tell her. That, or car chases, serial killers, and psychotic ringleaders made for a good bonding experience. Smiling, Chiaki said, "Though, I think a gamer versus a detective is uneven…"

"If it's you—I have no doubt you'll make it work." Kyoko's smile faltered. She, instead, gazed at Chiaki as if she was deliberating something.

Did something happen?

"…Nanami, I'm going to tell you a piece of information. Please be aware that it's a suspicion on my part, and you must keep it to yourself. I'm putting trust in you."

More secrets… She'd rather not, but Kyoko seemed intent on this. "Okay."

The detective walked close enough for her mouth to be next to Chiaki's ear.

She whispered, "Chisa Yukizome is suspicious."

What did she— Chiaki felt like ice water was in her veins when that line was uttered. She didn't
know what, when, how, or why—but Kyoko knew something.

"Watch out for her," she continued. "Now, shake my hand and walk away."

Chiaki, as told, shook Kyoko's hand while trying to look casual. The detective walked off, leaving the gamer with a mind that was racing. *What does she know...?*

**VVV**

The streets were barren, and vacant buildings towered over the area. This city had been abandoned long ago; however, there was one entity present.

Enigma stood alone in the middle of the street. His heavy clothing didn't allow him to feel the strong wind that blew along the empty highway. He had his arms bent behind his back as he waited for someone to arrive...for he knew a new emissary must be sent after Kitta's defeat. It was required, for he needed to keep this game of hope and despair going.

"...Kitta Takara, you're despair was too insignificant. Your hubris was your downfall. In the end, you were just a minor harbinger."

In the distance, a loud sound was heard. The man didn't so much as turn his head because he knew what it was—it was the someone he was waiting for. That loud sound was the engine of a motorcycle Black Rider was driving. The woman in the riding suit slowed down until she was right next to the masked man. Without a word, she turned towards him, his reflection being caught on her helmet.

"I'm making this improvisation," he said, still staring ahead. "This will be more telling as to what she really is. You know how to proceed, I trust?"

Black Rider, not replying verbally, revved the engine before speeding off.

Enigma held out his arm before closing his palm.

"...For you are the knight of the shadows."

**VVV**

It was morning when Chiaki and Chisa walked through the bottom floor. They were going to the helicopter that would take them back to their base. While walking, Chiaki chatted with Miaya over the phone. The gamer was thankful when Chisa allowed her to have other contacts, but it was likely because the housekeeper was certain of her obedience.

"I know I keep saying it, but you did wonderfully!" cheered Usami. "Forget being the savior. You're a superhero!"

Chiaki always thought it was hilarious how Miaya would opt to talk through Usami even over phone calls. Imagining the awkwardness of a customer support call or a serious talk with Kyosuke made her smile every time. "When can I see that surprise?"

"It'll be ready in a few weeks, don't worry. This was fun, but I need to go now. I really am proud of you."

"Bye."

"See you! Love, love!"
Chiaki ended the call and put the phone in her jacket's pocket. She had wanted to talk with the therapist yesterday, but they were both too busy at different times.

"Did you have fun talking to your second favorite woman?" asked Chisa, intertwining her fingers.

Chiaki ignored Chisa's implication. She hadn't told her about Kyoko's suspicions despite the detective's ominous words. The gamer, knowing the demented housekeeper better than she'd like to, half-expected her to already know about it, somehow. Chiaki was still skeptical on what her role was in the ambush. With all the mounting implications, she really didn't want to get that involved. Defying her former teacher still petrified her, and no boulevard of defiance looked promising.

"...How much longer will this go on, Ms. Yukizome?" she asked. "Sooner or later...we'll have to face the Remnants of Despair."

The housekeeper kept her eyes forward. "Perhaps, but you never know what else might be lurking."

*There she goes again...not giving any answer.*

"Don't let your win over Takara make you think this is over... There are too many pieces still on the board." She gazed down at Chiaki. "You won't admit it, but you're becoming exactly what I said you could be. Ever since your victory, there's a different aura around you. Dare I say...you're finding fulfillment in what we're doing?"

Chiaki didn't respond, prompting Chisa to laugh.

The duo had reached the lobby after minutes of walking. Normally, everyone would be busy with their own tasks, but something was different. There was a huge number of agents in the lobby—it was as if they were waiting for someone.

Then, all together, they started clapping.

*What's this about?* thought Chiaki. She assumed it was towards Chisa, but after looking around—that was wrong.

"Make no mistake, my dear," said Chisa. "They're cheering for you."

The gamer's eyes were agape as she looked around at all the smiling faces applauding her. It was like that time at the gaming tournament, but much more powerful. The adulation she was getting made her wonder if it was a trick by Chisa. However, it was not.

Chiaki, feeling a warmth overcome her, smiled while walking into the early day.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes

That's the end of this arc!

One of the coolest aspects of this, in my opinion, was the sort of metamorphosis in terms of tone. The first half of Bloom was more of a suspense/drama while this part seemed to be more suspense/thriller.
I was, originally, skeptical of my concept of Kitta's character, but she turned out exactly how I wanted; she did exactly what I needed her to do—which I still won't say. I also got to utilize characters from the seventy-eight class, so that was great. I've used many of the Hope's Peak era characters at this point.

The next half of this phase has a stunning turn of events in store! Oh, and expect more skits at the end of next chapter. Thank you for reading this far and being your beautiful selves!
Despite the ability to make her footsteps light, Chiaki could hear the creaking of old floorboards with every step she took. She rubbed her nose as dust from the ragged establishment tickled her nose. The gamer was in a once prominent orphanage that had been abandoned since the Tragedy had begun. According to Future Foundation sources, it was being used for some purpose by the Despairs.

It had been a month since Kitta's arrest. In that time, Chiaki's reputation had improved. Word of her accomplishment spread among everyone, resulting in her earning modest adulation. It had improved to such an extent, in fact, she was granted a role in the current task she was on.

It wasn't the mission itself that shocked her—it was who'd be joining.

"Take the side opposite of me," commanded Kyosuke, standing on one side of the wooden doors, katana in hand.

"Yes, sir," answered Chiaki, getting in position.

Upon learning the vice chairman himself would be partaking in the assignment, Chiaki thought it was a trick by Chisa. Yet, it turned out he had some interest in the mission. Whatever it was, the gamer didn't want to ask. Even though he didn't treat her with the same vitriol he did before, saying the duo was friendly was a far cry.

"Gozu," said Kyosuke, talking through a communication earpiece, "are you in position?"

They could hear Gozu's large breaths on the other side as he said, "Ready when you are."

"I trust you haven't forgotten your duty, Nanami? If you mess up, I'll likely die."

The vice chairman's brusque tone wasn't motivational, but the gamer wasn't deterred. If she screwed up, it'd be catastrophic. Such a responsibility should've been an honor, but Kyosuke treated it as more of a formality. "I won't mess up," she answered, her fingers on VEIL's screen.

Kyosuke put a small device on the door. After pressing a button, he took a few steps back. "Glasses on," he said, putting on a pair of advanced thermal specs while Chiaki did the same.

Then, after a few seconds, the device exploded—destroying the doorway.

"Now!" thought Chiaki, running forward and activating VEIL's barrier.

Immediately after she ran into the room, a parade of gunfire came her way. Chiaki, just as planned, took the forefront—protecting Kyosuke from the gunfire.

Next, Kyosuke tossed several smoke grenades that cut off visibility. In seconds, the wide room full of hostile Despairs was covered in smoke. Thanks to their eyewear, the division leaders had the complete initiative. Two things happened at once: Kyosuke charged forward with his katana ready, and Gozu busted into the room through the other door.

Chiaki had intended to assist the two men, but she saw it wasn't necessary. There were over twenty
Despairs—none of them could lay a finger on the fierce duo. Kyosuke moved quickly and cut down anything in his path while Gozu used his insane strength to blitz his way through everyone.

*He's unbelievable...* thought Chiaki. Gozu was impressive, but the vice chairman had completely mesmerized her. He moved smoothly from one spot to the next, swung the katana with amazing precision, and he seemed to be doing it all easily. Chiaki had heard rumors of his strength, but she had never seen it firsthand. She was so used to the gruff businessman persona, it was incredible to see him wield a blade so well.

Peko had been the best she’d ever seen with a sword; she was unsure of that assessment after seeing her boss in action.

As Chiaki was watching the amazing display, she saw a problem emerge. There was only one Despair left, and the smoke began to dissipate. Kyosuke was in the Despair's line of fire—he was too far back to reach him with his katana.

The Despair aimed…and pulled the trigger.

*No!* thought Chiaki, running to the vice chairman with VEIL ready. She knew her efforts were futile because the distance was too great.

Just as she gave up, the most incredible thing she ever saw happened.

Kyosuke—he had turned in time to see his attacker—put two hands on his katana's hilt. The Despair fired five shots in his direction. The vice chairman cut the first, the second, the third, the forth, and finally the fifth. He stared back at the Despair as if he was daring him to fire more shots.

"Surely," he said, "you can do better than that, trash."

The Despair showed hesitation before Gozu, appearing behind, grabbed and slammed his form into the wall. With that, the entire room had been cleared out.

"Is it okay to come in?" cheerfully asked Chisa, skipping into the room. She was, clearly, playing around because the bodies lying everywhere made it obvious.

"That it is," answered Gozu, cracking his knuckles. "It was an underwhelming match; I say we do it without the smoke next time."

Kyosuke wiped his blade on the coat of a dead Despair before he said, "I'll consider it." He gazed out of the corner of his eye to see an intriguing sight. Chiaki was staring at him with her jaw slightly agape. The perplexed vice chairman looked towards Chisa. "Yukizome, why is your former student staring at me like that?"

Before the housekeeper could respond, Chiaki said, "You cut the bullets… It's like a slow-mo ability from a game…"

"It's nothing," He shifted his impassive eyes forward and walked ahead.

"As much as he'd love to take full credit," said Chisa, "that katana assisted him. Izayoi designed it to act as a magnet when needed, making bullets drawn to it. Though, it still takes tremendous skill to properly use."

"Make no mistake," added Gozu, "that man is more capable than most. If memory serves, wasn't he eligible for seven different talents?"
Seven talents…? thought a stunned Chiaki. She didn't think her gamer talent was amazing, and it was all she could do. For someone to have that many—she couldn't wrap her head around it.

"Eleven, to be exact," corrected Chisa. "Ever since he was young, he's always been so…superior. I guess I might have something to do with that…"

"What does…” Chiaki let that sentence trail off because both Gozu and Chisa were advancing. The gamer straightened her hooded blazer before following, knowing this assignment wasn't over yet.

Chiaki couldn't help but feel uncomfortable while she walked through the old orphanage. She could almost see the images of innocent kids playing around because toys and children's objects littered the floor. She spotted an old model of a Game Girl before picking it up. The gamer didn't know if it was broken or the battery was dead, but it wouldn't cut on.

After abandoning the broken console, she caught up with Chisa and Gozu. As the trio traveled through a dusty hallway, the gamer glanced at a broken picture frame on the wall showing the smiling faces of kids. Then a faint sound could be heard. As they got farther, it grew louder.

Is that…a lullaby? thought Chiaki.

She saw the back of Kyosuke; he was still while looking at something. There were many beds, likely meaning this was the kids' bedroom. There was a lone Despair—an adult female—sitting on a bed while singing. Her back faced them, and she wasn't acknowledging their presence. The gamer gasped when she saw what the lady was staring at on the bed. It was the corpse of a child.

"How disgusting…” mentioned Chisa, tears—fake tears—welling in her eyes.

Kyosuke took a few steps forward before he said, "Enough of this. On your feet, Despair; you're under arrest. I'd cut you down, but I'd like at least one prisoner."

"Shhh," she replied, putting an index finger to her mask's mouth. "You'll wake her up. She was being a naughty girl, so I made her take a nap. I wanted to be a good nanny… I didn't want her to grow up to be rotten. Now, she can be a good little girl in a pleasant dream…forever." The woman rubbed the young girl's hair, making it much more unsettling.

Kyosuke tightened his gaze. "I thought I said to—"

The Despair pulled out a gun she was concealing and, for whatever reason, aimed at Chiaki. The gamer was so surprised, her fingers weren't moving to VEIL’s screen fast enough. Her eyes widened when the woman pulled the trigger.

"Chiaki!" yelled Chisa, running in front of her former student before shielding both of them with her white coat.

Three shots rang before Kyosuke threw his katana at the Despair, striking her in the center of the mask. The now dead woman tumbled to the ground while all eyes went to Chisa.

The housekeeper had collapsed on top of Chiaki. The gamer was unharmed, but her heart wouldn't calm down as she shook her former teacher. "Ms. Yukizome!" she cried out. "Ms. Yukizome! Ms. Yukizome…"

She could feel herself about to cry upon seeing the sight of Chisa not opening her eyes. Chisa would still be the despair-loving woman that had manipulated her; however, that was forgotten by her in those moments. The warm memories of their time at Hope's Peak came to her. It might've been better if Chisa had died, but her emotions took over on their own.
In those moments, nothing else seemed to matter.

"Yukizome," said Gozu, crossing his arms, "don't you think you've tormented her enough?"

"Haha!" laughed Chisa, unable to contain her giggling anymore.

"W-what…?" Chiaki felt like a hat with "dunce" on it should be placed on her head when she saw the laughing Chisa sit up, completely fine.

Kyosuke forcibly pulled the katana out of the dead Despair's head before using the bed sheets to clean it. "Must you lollygag right now, Yukizome? If you would've been a step slow, one of you could've been shot."

"Aww, lighten up. I'd knew it'd be alright." Chisa smiled before wiping a tear from Chiaki's face. "Sorry, but your reaction was just too cute and endearing. The way you cried for me like that —so adorable!"

Chiaki went from being somber to annoyed as Chisa hugged her. It felt like every time she tried feeling something for her, Chisa would pull a prank. "What about the bullets?" Chiaki asked.

"It was her coat," answered Gozu. "Most Future Foundation attire is designed with a special laminated fabric that cushions the impact from bullets—your blazer probably has it as well. Yukizome's coat is especially well-made."

"It's a lot more practical than wearing a bulletproof vest all the time," said Chisa. "It allowed me to protect myself and my little muffin."

Chisa hugged her again while Chiaki couldn't erase her annoyed look. *How does she keep doing this to me?* thought Chiaki.

"Where are the young ones?" asked Gozu.

Kyosuke looked towards a door at the far end of the room—it looked to be a closet. There was some rope tied around the doorknobs. "Behind there, most likely," answered the vice chairman. "Cover the body, Yukizome. Open the door, Gozu."

"I don't think the kids would react well to seeing a giant person wearing a bull mask," said Chisa, covering the corpse. "No offense, Gozu."

"None taken. Nanami, you open it."

"Okay."

Chiaki walked to the doors and proceeded to untie the rope. After that was taken care of, she opened the door. She was greeted by a wide closet that was mostly empty—except for the many kids lying on the floor. Fortunately, while they look weak, they were still alive.

"They're here!" announced Chiaki towards her co-workers.

Some of the children were lying down, hopefully unconscious, while others were sitting up with weak eyes. They were all in rags and looked skinny—likely from being malnourished. In total, there was over a dozen. None of them looking over the age of thirteen. Chiaki was having trouble stomaching the harsh scene.

"A-are you here to punish us…?" asked a boy in a weak voice. His sandy colored hair matched the
unconscious little girl's that he was holding. "Don't hurt my sister…please…"

"No one is going to hurt you anymore." Chiaki bent down and gave a gentle look towards the boy. "You're safe now."

VVV

After the orphanage was secured and the orphans were found, the medics were brought in. Some of the children didn't have much strength to walk, so they had to be given immediate first aid. There was also a wide search being done to see if any more kids, dead or alive, was around. It was important to disclose the identities of all the kids present because the Future Foundation frequently got reports of missing and abducted children.

The murky evening sky—the pollution still hadn't been cleansed from the atmosphere—was the backdrop as the division leaders were right outside the orphanage. Their jobs were done, and now it was the search team's turn. Kyosuke had already left, claiming he had more work that needed to be done, while Chiaki, Gozu, and Chisa stayed behind.

As they were on standby, the kids healthy enough to move around showed appreciation. Gozu and Chisa looked on as the orphans gathered around Chiaki. Since she was the first face they saw, the children were convinced the gamer was the hero. The result was a shower of questions.

"Are you a superhero!"

"Did you beat up all those bad guys yourself?"

"Why is part of your hair that color!"

"Uh…" Chiaki scratched her chin while smiling, not knowing how to manage her admirers. She wasn't all that experienced in dealing with children. Even when she was a child, she barely conversed with other kids.

"You should know, children," said Chisa, looking to egg them on, "not only is she the Ultimate Gamer—she's the savior."

"Whoa!" they all exclaimed simultaneously with awe on their faces.

"Can you grow wings!"

"Are you an angel!"

"What's the highest score you ever got in a game!"

"Um, I got the high scores on all the games at my local arcades. Actually, I single-handily owned the top five scores for most of them." The children continued to be enthralled as Chiaki indulged her new fan club with gaming feats.

"In times like these," said Gozu, "moments like this seem all the more heartwarming."

"Indeed. Who knows what could've happened if this place wasn't discovered?"

"It's a testament to your division's prudence, Yukizome." Gozu straightened his tie while a question hung on his tongue. "Why did Munakata want to participate? This seems beneath him."

"Years ago, we used to volunteer at this orphanage. Community service looks good on any resume, after all. He didn't forget this place."
"The vice chairman never struck me as the sentimental-type."

"It's not like he'd ever admit to it." The housekeeper took a look at her phone. "You and Chiaki can go on ahead. I'll be transporting the children."

"Are you sure you want to do that yourself? I'll gladly assist you."

"No, I'll be fine. Don't forget my talent—I'm wonderful with children!" Chisa narrowed her eyes, staring at the orphans fawning over her former student. "I'm sure it will go without a hitch…"

VVV

A day after the successful rescue of the orphans, Chiaki was at the main headquarters of the Future Foundation. Since Chisa would be arriving after the transport of the children, Chiaki—as Chisa told her—waited for her arrival. Knowing she'd be there awhile, Aoi offered to accompany her. The duo was running on the track field located in the indoor training facility.

"You feelin' the burn, Boss!" yelled Aoi, sprinting.

"I'm feeling something…" answered Chiaki through ragged breaths. She grabbed her side when a sharp pain appeared. "I think I have a cramp…"

"Hehe, I told you to drink more water. Let's stop for today."

As of late, when she wasn't busy with an assignment or Chisa, Aoi had become like a personal trainer to her. The swimmer was good at conditioning because of her ability to maintain a healthy form—even with the large consumption of her beloved glazed goods.

The duo would get dressed in some light clothing, and perform a few basic exercises from time to time. At first, Chiaki objected because she'd rather play games and physical activity wasn't her forte, but Aoi would object—saying things like, "A healthy mind can better exist in a healthy body!" She claimed it was something Sakura told her.

"You can beat up killers and jump from helicopters, but you can barely run a few laps," commented Aoi, before drinking from a water bottle. "How does that even work…?" Aoi glanced over her shoulder, seeing Chiaki had vanished. Where did she—

Aoi felt as if electricity surged through her body when she felt something appear next to her. The swimmer was so startled, she jumped back and faced whomever was there. Aoi lowered her guard when she saw the surprised face of her boss standing there. Chiaki had her hand out like she was going to pat Aoi on the shoulder.

"Is…something wrong?"

"Is something wrong?" said Aoi, taking a breath and putting a hand over her beating heart. "You scared the heck out of me. It's like you teleported or something."

Chiaki smiled. "Sorry, I try not to—it's become a habit, though."

"Maybe you should be the one training me. Who needs to be fit when you can turn into a ninja? Where did you learn that?"

"Ms. Yukizome has been…helping me with things."

"Is that what it takes to be a housekeeper nowadays? Since when do you need to be an assassin to
"Hey!" yelled the voice of the approaching Ryouta. The animator smiled as he walked towards the duo. As always, his eyes had bags under them, and he looked exhausted. His nebbish demeanor seemed to be the same too.

"Mitarai," said Chiaki, happy to see her former classmate. She barely got to converse with him because they were always busy. The only time she would see him was when there was a meeting.

Aoi observed him before she said, "You look tired."

"Heh, that's normal for me," he answered. "In order to make great anime, you have to be willing to do without some sleep. Also, I've been assisting the chairman with some...things."

"You must be good at your job if the chairman has made you his right-hand man," said Aoi.

Mitarai, rubbing the back of his head, said, "Not really. Anyway, Ms. Yukizome said to come see her, Nanami. She's waiting at the bar on the seventh floor."

"So, she's returned..." said Chiaki, groaning internally. She would've liked to hang out with Aoi and Ryouta a while longer, but she knew the drill when it came to the insane housekeeper. "I should hurry."

"Oh," said Ryouta, looking troubled, "and I'm sorry about what happened to those kids you saved; it's so horrible."

"What?" Her eyes widened, not knowing what Ryouta was referring to.

"You didn't hear? The transport was ambushed by Despairs, and they killed all the orphans that were present. All their bodies were buried... Ms. Yukizome was so upset, and I heard Munakata was irate."

_They were...murdered...?_ thought Chiaki, putting a hand to her aching heart with a sad expression. She pictured of all those cheery kids, weak and suffering, having their lives stolen for no reason at all.

Then, immediately after, her mind went to another detail.

_Ms. Yukizome was in charge of that... Would she have—_

"I'm so sorry..." murmured Aoi, eyes downcast. "Even though Enoshima is dead and despair is declining—it's still so horrible out there..."

Chiaki hid her grief and smiled at her subordinate. "It'll be okay. I need to shower and get changed, so I'm going now." Chiaki sprinted towards the locker room before she turned around and said, "And you should look at Mitarai's anime!"

VVV

The gamer straightened her blazer before walking into the seventh-floor bar. Four people were currently occupying it: Chisa, Koichi, Gozu, and the bartender. The three division leaders were conversing while sitting on stools. The bartender was mixing a drink—likely alcoholic. The back bar had a beautiful assortment of multi-colored glasses and bottles. The light gave the area a soothing purple glow.
"Look, guys!" yelled Chisa, red in the face, pointing at Chiaki with a drink in hand. "Chiaki has arrived!"

She's already drunk, thought Chiaki, preparing for a stressful time. After waving, she took a seat next to Chisa.

"Ah," said the bartender, casting his blue eyes towards Chiaki, "who might this young lady be?"

Chiaki, after glancing at the bartender, noticed his look. He was a young man with wavy blond hair. His blue eyes seem to almost glow, and his accent sounded exotic. The gamer could tell he was most likely a foreigner. Also, his mannerisms were debonair.

"She's Chiaki Nanami," answered Gozu, "former Ultimate Gamer and leader of the Thirteenth Division."

"I see." He bowed, putting a hand on his black vest. "A pleasure to meet you."

If this was a visual novel, thought Chiaki, he'd be the smooth servant guy.

Koichi took a drink of his alcoholic beverage and said, "Antoine here is from France. I scouted him for the title of Ultimate Bartender a few years back. Believe me; no one makes a drink as well as him."

"If anyone knows alcohol," said Chisa, bobbing from side to side as if she was listening to a catchy tune, "it would be you." The housekeeper turned to her former student. "Do you drink, Chiaki? Have a drink with us!"

"Well..." Chiaki was old enough to drink now. It's not as if she had any bad reservations, but it didn't seem like something that would interest her. "I don't know..."

"Heh," laughed Koichi. "Drinking is an important social ritual to us Japanese. Even if you hate alcohol, you'll love Antoine's drinks."

Chiaki tilted her head. "One wouldn't hurt, I guess."

"Yay!" cheered Chisa. "Antoine, make her a Blue Fairy, please. Mix with a tiny, tiny bit of alcohol."

"As you wish."

A few moments later, her drink was ready. "Here you are," said Antoine. "Some advice: don't drink too quickly, and do not let it touch your teeth. A Blue Fairy will turn them as blue as the ocean."

"Thanks." Chiaki took the glass and stared at the contents. The lectures that Mahiru would give
about how bad alcohol is rung in her head. She figured it was an exaggeration, but the gamer was a little afraid that one sip would make her addicted for life. Still, the kind bartender and her fellow division leaders were watching, so she took a sip.

The moment the liquid touched her tongue...she had to force herself not to chug the whole thing. A waterfall of sweetness and flavor entered her mouth. This was the best beverage she had ever drunk. Even the sugary sodas that would help her pull all night gaming sessions couldn't compare.

However, "It was tasty," was all she said.

"Haha," laughed Antoine. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Chiaki took another sip, then another, then another, and so on. She didn't know when it started, but the gamer could feel herself get light-headed. For some reason, she had the urge to become more talkative. She turned to Koichi and asked, "Kizakura, did you know Kitta Takara? She had a grudge against you."

"Kitta Takara?" Koichi put a finger to his chin, trying to recall if he had ever seen the idol's profile. "Actually...I remember now. She was eligible for the seventy-eight class, and I was planning on scouting her. Sayaka Maizono was splendid, but it was Takara I was initially interested in."

"Why didn't you?"

"I couldn't; Jin said it himself. Hope's Peak Academy scout's get assignments, but I had the privilege of scouting how I pleased because my success rate was nearly perfect."

"That's odd," said Gozu. "Why did he tell you not to?"

"I, too, thought it was weird at the time. Even so, orders are orders. I ended up scouting Maizono instead. It might seem bad in hindsight because of all the atrocities she committed, but I would've gone after Takara."

He was told not to? thought Chiaki. Why...?

"Your former teacher was something special," said Koichi, taking a swig. "Yukizome was such a blossom when I first met her. Honestly, if you ask me, she could've been something more than just a housekeeper."

"Oh stop," said Chisa, blushing. "You're embarrassing me. I'm proud of my talent. It's not very glorified, but somebody has to do it."

"You were interesting too, Nanami. Once I learned about you, I knew I had to convince you to attend Hope's Peak."

Chiaki smiled. "Really?"

"I don't think you realize how sought after the Ultimate Gamer talent was. I had hundreds to choose from—much more than most talents. You just had that X-factor I've trained myself to see. Evidently, after everything you've accomplished at the Future Foundation, I feel more than satisfied with who I chose." The scout tipped his fedora, winking at the gamer.

"I don't know if—"

Chiaki's sentence came to a halt when a loud bang was heard. It turned out to be Gozu slamming his meaty fist on the counter. Everyone looked at him while he hung his head. "Is something
"Wrong, big guy?" asked Koichi.

"I'm sorry; I can't stop thinking about her…"

"I see." Koichi smiled with sympathy before patting Gozu on the back. "It was around this time of year, right?"

Chiaki, wondering what was going on, asked, "What happened?"

"It's his mother," answered Chisa, looking sorrowful—a facade, of course. "Ever since he began wrestling in his youth, his mother was his biggest supporter. Even when she was ill, she'd attend every one of his matches. Sadly, she passed a few years ago from heart complications."

"Every venue," said Gozu, "she'd be sitting in the front row, cheering my name… I'll never forget when I won my first championship, she rushed into the ring and hugged me—the only person who supported me…"

"I understand." Koichi bent his head, making his eyes vanish behind his fedora. "Being the top scout I am, I'm always traveling on my own. I have to make connections with others and then move on to the next. I even made a promise to my close friend one day about protecting his daughter, but…it seems I may never be needed for that…"

Then the two men hugged each other while the scout reassured the sulking wrestler. Chiaki stared at the scene, wondering if this was another effect of the alcohol. "…Will you two be alright?" asked Chiaki.

"Sadly," said Koichi, "this is something you can never truly understand. This is a sacred thing… The plight of men!"

The gamer looked interested in this revelation while Chisa was struggling not to laugh. "Perhaps," said Chisa, "you two have had enough to drink. Maybe some fresh air will help?"

"You're a bright one, as always, Yukizome," agreed Koichi, rising up along with Gozu. "Let's take a walk, bud."

As the two walked away, the scout patted Gozu on the back while the wrestler kept muttering, "She was still so young…"

"I know, I know."

The two men exited the bar, leaving the former student-teacher duo alone. That display made Chiaki wonder something. "Ms. Yukizome, what is the plight of women?"

"Haha, depends on what day and which one you ask, my dear."

Chiaki took her glass—Antoine had given her a refill—and drank more. The drink was so good, she couldn't stop herself from gulping it down. She felt light-headed before; she was feeling it much more clearly now. After Chiaki finished it off, she played with the glass in her hand and slouched her shoulders.

"Feeling relaxed?" asked Chisa, getting amusement out of watching the savior.

"It's like that game where you play as a female bartender in a future society."

"Have you actually played all the games you're always referencing?"
Chiaki puffed out her cheeks. "I'm not some gamer girl who talks about games she's never beaten."

"Oh, well excuse me." Chisa took another sip of her drink. "How's your self-righteous, stick-in-the-mud, uptight rival doing?"

"I haven't seen her since we talked with the vice chairman. Why?"

"Antoine, I'm sorry, but could you let us speak privately for a few minutes?"

The bartender smiled modestly before he said, "Very well. I'll be in the back if either of you needs anything."

After he left, Chisa rested her head on her palm and moved her finger along the rim of the glass. "Lately, she's been keeping an annoyingly close eye on me. She's also been snooping around places I'd prefer she didn't. If I didn't know any better...I'd say I was under an investigation."

The housekeeper glanced Chiaki's way. "What do you think?"

The gamer didn't know if the alcohol was causing it, but it seemed like Chisa was accusing her of conspiring with Kyoko. "...I don't know. Kirigiri did tell me she made sure to investigate all the division leaders. That's just how she is, I think."

Chisa narrowed her eyes. "Yes, that's probably it. Admittedly, however, she's pissing me off. I might have to clean up a bit.

"You're going to—"

"No, I won't kill her; there's no need."

Chiaki, not knowing what it meant, began to get paranoid. She was tempted to get a hold of Kyoko and tell her to back off, but she knew that wouldn't work. So, wanting to change the subject, she said, "I didn't know you drink."

"Heh, I don't, not really. Kizakura and Gozu saw how distraught I was after the orphans were killed and offered me an invitation—I accepted."

Was she distraught? thought Chiaki, knowing that shouldn't be possible. On the subject of the Despairs, the gamer recalled an important topic she's been pondering for weeks. "I've thought about who Enigma could be."

"Yeah?"

The gamer put a finger to her chin. "Like I told you, Izuru Kamakura was my first guess. It would make sense because he should be really incredible. I don't know why he'd pretend not to know about my execution, though..."

"I see."

"I've also thought about Komaeda. Maybe he beat Sakakura because he got really lucky."

"Could be."

"Or it could be another friend Junko had that we don't know about."

"Possibly."

Chiaki glared at the housekeeper. "You know, don't you?"
"Maaaaybe, hehe." Chisa grinned and patted her legs. "Stop worrying about everything. Honestly, you should be thankful you're in good health. How long did it take you to recover from the mission involving Takara?"

"I felt exhausted afterward, but I was fine the next day."

"Hmm, it's as I thought." Chisa played with the ice in her glass. "I have a theory: I think, in addition to healing you, that machine made your body stronger. After months of inactivity, you were back on your feet in weeks. You were doping, fighting, and underwent extreme mental trauma—and you were fine shortly after."

"I have regeneration powers…?" Chiaki looked at her palms, wondering if she had an ability.

"No, it's nothing instantaneous like that. It's more along the lines of your body having an amazing vitality and perseverance."

So it's like my HP stat is super-high along with a health regen ability, thought Chiaki, putting it in terms she could understand. "Did Kamakura mean to do that?"

"It was probably unintentional. That, or he had no choice. I don't think he wanted to give you any more of an advantage than you already had. After all, his game of hope and despair must not be tainted."

"Oh…" murmured the gamer, staring down.

"Don't tell me you still have feelings for that brain dead Reserve Course student? He left you alive only to serve his whim. Ha, he also handed you to little ol' me. Are you not upset over any of that?"

Chiaki squeezed her palms together. "I don't know what Hinata or Kamakura really think, but—"

The gamer looked right into Chisa's eyes. "—I'm alive."

The housekeeper heartily laughed for a few seconds, unable to contain it. "Your feelings are pure and naive—it's amusing." Chisa wondered if she should tell Chiaki a little tidbit she remembered about Izuru. Deciding to tell her, she said, "According to him, when he saw you lose conscious after your execution—he began to cry against his will."

Chiaki gasped in shock. It was a swift meeting, but she remembered her encounter with the artificially created Ultimate Hope. The thought of her "death" bringing him to tears—she wasn't sure what to make of it. "Does that mean…Hinata isn't fully gone…?"

"Think of it what you will."

Chisa proceeded to lay her head down on the counter while Chiaki’s mind was consumed with what she was just told. If what Chisa said was true, that meant part of Hajime could be alive in some way. Every time she thought of Hajime, she felt pain. This was the first time she believed he could return one day.

VVV

After an hour of relaxing at the bar, Chisa had expressed how sleepy she was. Since the housekeeper was tipsy at the moment, Chiaki—who was a light-headed herself—let her former teacher use her shoulder for support. The gamer led them to the floor they’d be staying the night at. The entire walk, Chisa kept babbling and laughing about random things.

"You know something funny, Chiaki?"
"What?"
"Your face, hahaha!"
"Very funny, Ms. Yukizome…"
"Hey, Chiaki?"
The gamer sighed. "Yes?"
"I need to tell you something I've never told you before… I love you so much."
"You've told me that five times in the last hour…"
Chiaki was glad upon seeing their rooms. She opened the door to Chisa's room before turning on the lights. Then the gamer had led the housekeeper to her bed. Once they were there, she let Chisa fall on the comfy sheets.
"Thanks," said Chisa, closing her eyes. "Did you enjoy drinking for the first time?"
"I think I'll stick to games."
"Suit yourself," Chisa reached into her coat and pulled out a rectangular object that was in gift wrap. "This is for you."
"…Why?" asked Chiaki, taking the object. It was the size of a cereal box.
"Do you have to question everything I do? What's wrong with getting a gift for my favorite girl?"
The gamer, too tired to carry on this conversation, accepted the gift. "Goodnight," she said.
"Night, my cinnamon roll."
Chiaki switched the lights off and left the room. Thankfully, her room was only a few doors down, not making it much of a walk. The first thing she did was plop down on the bed and close her eyes for a bit. Then she turned on a lamp before slowly unwrapped Chisa gift, hoping it wasn't something nefarious. It turned out to be a picture frame with an interesting photo inside.

_I remember this…_

The picture depicted Chiaki, in her Hope's Peak jacket, being hugged by Chisa from behind. The picture was taken by Mahiru shortly after Chisa returned from the Reserve Course. The class had taken many pictures over that year; the gamer remembered this one fondly. She assumed all their class photos were destroyed, so it was a surprise to see this one intact. She couldn't help but grin when looking at the big smiles they had that day.

_She kept it all this time._ When the gamer sat up, she saw something fall off the back of the frame. Evidently, there was another photo attached to the back. Chiaki, confused, picked it up and examined it. Her heart almost nearly jumped in her throat.

_This is…!_

The picture she held showed a bunch of graves in front of the orphanage they staged the rescue operation at. What really made her sick, was the other detail in this photo.

It was Chisa smiling while the words "it was me" was written on it.
S-she really did it…

It wasn't surprising that she'd do it, but after the calm afternoon she just had—the reminder of Chisa's cruelty was like a slap in the face. Not to mention the kids the gamer had helped save was killed by the woman she's too afraid to rebel against. Even if the consequences would've been massive, maybe they'd still be alive if she had taken action.

Then a thought came to her: *Wait... I have the picture now. Maybe... if I show this to everyone...*

Chiaki hopped out of bed and ran to the door. Once she opened it... she felt ashamed to not be surprised at who was there.

"Oh, you found it!" Chisa said, grabbing the picture out of Chiaki's grip. "I can't believe I misplaced this." Chisa, looking loopy, put her head close to Chiaki and whispered, "I'll need this later on, hehe." Then, not letting Chiaki get a word in, the housekeeper walked back into her room.

Chiaki looked downward, feeling frustrated. It seemed like every time she forgot, Chisa would give her a harsh reminder of what reality was now. The thought of the warm, bright teacher murdering kids for entertainment—it was too much. Even if it meant her not being saved back then, if she could, she'd undo what happened to her former teacher.

*Why did this have to happen to you...?*

**Chapter End Notes**

**Author's Notes**

1. Random skit time!

**Random Skit #6 Dynamic Detectives**

"What a tragedy," commented a young man while he and a young girl looked at a dead body. Future Foundation agents were investigating a crime scene in a run-down apartment.

"Look, it's Kirigiri," commented the young girl.

The detective examined the body and immediately began feeling it up.

What the heck! thought both of the agents.

"Kirigiri," said Chiaki, entering, "need some help?"

"I can't figure out what this is," said Kyoko, holding some sticky substance.

"Hmm..." Chiaki took it and put it in her mouth before chewing.

Gross! thought both the agents.

"It seems to be glue."

"Ah, that's what I thought. Thank you, Nanami."
"Sure, Kirigiri."

What are they…? thought the agents.

Random Skit #7 Weakness

"Say my sweets are the best!" yelled Ruruka.

"Nope," responded Aoi. I'll never praise this nasty lady.

"Oh yeah?" Ruruka smiled as she pulled out a box filled with donuts she made. "Let's see if you say that after trying one of these."

Crap… My one true weakness… "Alright, just one." The swimmer took a donut and bit into it—she could've sworn she died and went to heaven for a second. It took all her willpower not to snatch the box out of Ruruka's hands and fork it all down. "Ugh, you win…"

"Hehe, that's what I thought."

Random Skit #8 The Never Ending Modesty

"Well, you're really great at being the savior, Nanami," said Makoto.

"Nah. You're really great at being Ultimate Hope."

"You're definitely a great division leader."

"Heh, you'd be better at leading a division than me."

"I don't—"

Random Skit #9 Best Despair Friends Forever

Currently, Junko and Kitta were sitting on top of a building. The sunset was beautiful while a busy street lay below them. The duo was relaxing and enjoyed the breeze.

"You know, Junko," said Kitta, "I enjoy days like this." The idol proceeded to pull a pin out a grenade and toss it below.

An explosion was heard while somebody screamed, "Oh my god!"

"Yeah, even I can enjoy days like this." Junko threw a grenade down as well.

"Who is doing this!" yelled someone below.

"I'm still a bit bummed at that dumb Reserve Course, though…" Kitta threw another grenade.

"Why is this happening!" yelled a man.

"At least we're friends."

Junko smiled widely, making Kitta do the same. "Yeah."

"I'm bored; let's go spread despair somewhere else."
"Got it, best friend." The two got up and put an arm around each other. They walked into the sunset with the sound of death and despair below them.

"Kitta, this sure is a beautiful friendship."

"Couldn't agree more."
Nagito Komaeda had a smirk on his face while he walked to the gate of Hope's Peak Academy. After the stunt he pulled earlier, he was suspended indefinitely. Naturally, one who loved being around people with talent would be devastated at having to leave.

But, that was not the case.

He held pride in the fact his actions, while extreme, managed to aid the others. The Ultimate Lucky Student was proud even filth like him managed to help everyone. Admittedly, he did feel some regret about getting Chisa in trouble, but he knew she'd be fine. He didn't know where he'd go for the time being—a boy with nothing.

Even so, he walked from the academy of hope with his head held high. He flicked a strand of his pale hair, the orange afternoon sun bathing him with its rays. After his talk with Chisa, he decided to leave. It's not like his classmates would care about saying goodbye to him, at least that's what he concluded.

What puzzled him, however, was what Chisa said to him. He touched his cheek, recalling how the conversation went. Never before had someone spoke to him like that. It didn't happen often, but her actions caught him off guard; he didn't know what to think of it.

Is that…? thought Nagito, seeing a familiar girl in a cream-colored hoodie waiting at the gate.

"Komaeda," said Chiaki, eyes downcast.

"This is an honor," he replied, smiling humbly. "The class representative herself has come to see me off? I'm overcome with happiness."

"… Why did you do it?"

Nagito looked confused. "What do you mean? Everyone was upset about the exam and the death of those two girls; I had to do something." The way he talked sounded casual; he saw no fault in what he did.

Chiaki narrowed her eyes. "You went too far. You could've come to me, and then we could've thought of something to cheer everyone up."

"Ms. Yukizome is gone, and you have to leave. Things have been so tough, so we should all be together…"

"You could've hurt someone, Ms. Yukizome is gone, and you have to leave. Things have been so tough, so we should all be together…"

"Ms. Yukizome will return, eventually. Also, I don't think me being absent really matters."

"You're wrong."

"I mean, after all, I'm just trash that was lucky enough to walk among you all. If I ended up being of use, then I—"

Nagito's sentence was halted when he felt Chiaki's palm slap him. It was on the side Chisa had hit earlier. Her expression mirrored Chisa's as well; although, the gamer looked more sorrowful.
"You're always saying stuff like that. I thought my talent would never amount to anything, but I learned I can help people with it. You're smart—smarter than me—so you could definitely be helpful. I want everyone together, including you."

Nagito stared back at her, not showing any particular reaction. Just like earlier, he wasn't sure how to respond.

"So," said Chiaki, staring at him with vigor, "help me understand you! If I can, we could help the others understand you too. Then we can all play games and hang out like before."

Nagito widened his eyes before laughing under his breath. "Truly, you were the correct choice for class rep. Your kindness is better served elsewhere. Being too close to me will only lead to bad things for you and others."

"Well, I consider you my friend, and nothing has happened yet—maybe my bad luck resistance stat is too high."

"As expected, your optimism is as potent as your hope. It's no wonder you're Ms. Yukizome's favorite and trusts you with everything," Nagito walked past Chiaki, not meeting her eyes. "Regardless, my luck would come for you...just like it does for everyone else..."

While Nagito walked past the gate, Chiaki felt ashamed she couldn't get through to him. Despite misgivings from the class, she wanted to hear his motivation for doing what he did. Right when she was about to leave—she turned her head when Nagito, his back facing her, said, "You know...there is something about you I can't figure out..."

"What's that mean?"

"It's not the absolute hope I'm looking for, but...I can't help but be intrigued."

Chiaki, as usual, didn't understand what he meant. "I'm not special."

"It makes sense you wouldn't notice it." Nagito put a hand in his pocket. "While I'm away, I'll continue being a supporting pillar for those who embody hope." He gazed at her, with a smile, and said, "We'll meet again."

Chiaki watched as Nagito departed while the orange sky continued darkening.

VVV

"Chiaki?" said Usami, commanded by Miaya. "You look deep in thought."

"I was just...remembering something."

The reserved duo was walking through the hallway of Miaya's base—the same place Chiaki woke from her coma. As her friendly therapist promised, she had a surprise for the gamer. Miaya kept insisting she'd get to experience something few ever have. The gamer had grown to dislike surprises because most came from the insane housekeeper, but she knew Miaya must've had something awesome in store.

"May I ask what it was about?"

"It was a talk I had with a classmate." Chiaki wanted to take this opportunity to ask Miaya about Nagito's ideals. She knew there were few who could provide a better answer than her. "I tried, but I failed to understand him; do you think you could help?"
"Absolutely! What was he like?"

"He loved talent and Hope's Peak. He thought all he was good for was being supportive of Ultimates, and he had no other use. He did things to help the class that got him in trouble. He was one of the smartest, but he refused to see himself as our equal."

Miaya looked to the side for a moment before she said, "Was he polite to you all? Did he come off as strange to others, and show unconcern to his actions?"

Amazing! She was impressed by how on-the-nose Miaya was using that vague description she gave her. "Are you sure you're not psychic?"

"Haha, that would make my job easier, but no. I've talked with a few types like that before who've had a fanatical approach. Though, this is the first I've heard of an Ultimate admiring other Ultimates. What was his talent?"

"He was our classes' lottery winner."

"Let's see..." Usami put a paw on her face. "Do you think his worship could've been a facade?"

Chiaki didn't need to ponder that. "No way; he would go out of his way to help, even if it was something small."

"I was thinking more of an unconscious desire. It's popularly accepted among psychologists that the unconscious mind contains desires and impulses we aren't aware of. Perhaps he held a resentment towards talent, but his conscious mind interprets it as admiration and even religious worship."

"That sounds really complicated..."

"The human mind is extremely complex. If you want, I can teach you about the levels of the mind, how they coexist, and theories from popular philosophers and psychologist."

"Umm..." Chiaki held her head. Her brain ached from just hearing all this. "This sounds like a complicated plot from a game."

"Yes, it can be daunting to learn." The duo turned a corner. "Did you consider this boy a friend?"

"I did."

"You don't anymore?"

Chiaki's mind went back to Nagito's sudden appearance after being absent for many months. She'd never forget how that day went. She didn't know how—nor did Chisa when she asked—but Nagito knew something about Junko and led her there. The gamer was sure if Nagito hadn't gone through with his extreme plan of gunning Junko down—they wouldn't have gotten in trouble, and Chisa wouldn't have had to intervene.

Still, her feelings on this were the same as Ryouta's situation. She didn't feel any burning resentment because she felt just as responsible. "It doesn't matter," she said. "He's dead, probably."

"I wouldn't give up hope. Yukizome claims they likely died, but none of their bodies have been discovered yet. You could see them again; crazier things have happened."

"Like what?"
"Well," said Usami, while Miaya grinned behind her scarf, "you lived."

Chiaki smiled, feeling her melancholy evaporate like raindrops under the sun. She knew they were alive, yet the therapist statement still made her happy. *She always knows what to say.*

The duo walked and chatted for a few minutes until Miaya stopped her wheelchair at a door. The gamer noticed how vacant the floor they were on was. After Miaya opened the door, they stepped inside and was greeted by a dim room full of computers and an odd pod-shaped machine.

"What room is this?"

"A secret lab where I turn Future Foundation agents into cyborgs."

Chiaki's eyes lit up. "Really! Can they shoot laser beams and stuff!"

"Hehe, I'm kidding." Miaya blinked at her like she always did when attempting humor. "This room was meant to be a safety measure concerning the Neo World Program."

The gamer remembered having a meeting about the classified project. It was months ago, so it had slipped her mind. Still, the premise of a psychotherapeutic virtual reality that could cure despair sounded like a dream. Just maybe, it could be the catalyst for her friends' recovery. Perhaps even Chisa could benefit from it. It sounded too good to be true, so she figured it was.

Miaya went to a huge computer while she said, "Makoto Naegi is the one who gave me the idea to put a fail-safe in the system. I was so certain of its security, I didn't consider it. However, not only did I agree with it, I took it a step further. That pod you see is another emergency measure I created."

"What kind of emergency?"

"In the case of a virus or anomaly, I made this machine to allow myself to enter the program as well. It would allow me to bypass the rules of the system, and obtain the privileges of an administrator."

"It's a backdoor into the program."

"Exactly. It'll transfer your mind to the main server, which is at a secret location."

As fascinating as this information was, Chiaki still couldn't understand something pivotal. "Why did we come here?" She watched in awe as Miaya quickly typed commands on the keyboard while controlling Usami.

"Because I'll let you dive into the Neo World Program."

Chiaki gasped, thinking she misheard. Then she thought Miaya could be joking again. "Really? Is that allowed…?"

"It's fine. What you're entering is a sandbox—a testing environment—for you to explore. I've already tested this multiple times, and I'll stay here and monitor your body."

She was speechless. Being the gaming savant she was, one of her desires was to see virtual reality. Now she'd be one of the first to experience it. Her mind raced, wondering what kind of amazing fantasy world awaited. "Is there gonna be some kind of magical land inside?"

"Hehe, hardly. Sorry to disappoint, but the area you'll be in will be small and ordinary. Though, I'll
guarantee you'll find it nostalgic." After Miaya pushed a few more keys, the pod-shaped machine roared to life with a low hum and glowed. "It's ready."

Chiaki saw the glass over the pod open. *This is out of a sci-fi game…*

"Just lie inside and relax. I promise there will be no pain."

Chiaki climbed inside and lay down. Despite the look, it wasn't uncomfortable. While she trusted the therapist, she felt a little timid when the glass closed and contained her. Miaya looked down at her with a reassuring look before rolling away.

Then, a few seconds later, Chiaki felt her mind leave her body.

VVV

Chiaki, blinking a few times, stood and looked around. The change in scenery seemed instant. One moment, she was lying in the pod—now she looked around at an all too familiar backdrop.

*This is Hope's Peak Academy…*

The halls of the once prominent academy were her backdrop. She knew it was fake, but the hyper-realism made her feel like she had leaped back in time. It was like the events leading up to the Tragedy never happened. *This is incredible!*

"Hello!" said a familiar voice. Chiaki turned to see Usami, not on a computer screen—but as an actual thing.

"Usami? How did you get out of Miaya's computer?"

"Inside the Neo World Program, I'm a—"

Usami, her sentence being interrupted, was improperly picked up by Chiaki. The gamer closely examined the rabbit before tugging on her ears. "So fuzzy…"

"Hey, take it easy!"

"Sorry." The gamer put Usami down, thinking of one of her favorite games. "I have the urge to get a small capsule device and catch you with it."

"I don't know what that means—but, like I was saying, I'm an Observer! My duty is to aid any patients in their psychotherapy! Pretty neat, huh?"

"Is that why I'm here, for therapy?"

"Nope!" Usami waved her wand around before twirling it. "There's someone here Ms. Gekkogahara would like you to meet! Do you remember where the recreational room is?"

Chiaki put a finger to her chin. "It was on…the third floor, I think?"

"You bet! They'll be waiting there; love, love!"

In a flash, Usami disappeared. At this point, Chiaki just shrugged and accepted this odd phenomenon.

There were a few feelings running through her: nostalgia, sadness, and optimism. Seeing a perfect recreation of Hope's Peak made memories of her class doing all sorts of things in this building
appear. With those memories, came sadness. Sadness that those pleasant times ended as abruptly and cruelly as they did.

Yet, she began feeling optimistic. If even her, who knew this wasn't real, could become this immersed—she wondered what actual patients would feel. The scene of her classmates being put in here to undergo recovery kept playing in her head. It was a promising prospect, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something would go wrong—it always seemed to with her.

*It's not real...* she kept thinking. The gamer was afraid she'd fool herself into believing everything that happened was a dream, and the class would be waiting for her upon arrival.

After reaching the stairs, she walked to the third floor. Just as she remembered, the rec room was waiting for her on the right, only a few steps away. She approached the door and put an ear to it; hearing nothing, she walked inside while bracing herself for anything.

Like the hallway, the rec room was a perfect replica of the original. The gamer remembered coming here to play games with others on occasion, even though digital was the way she preferred her games. She shoved aside her memories and focused on the most important aspect of this room—there was a person sitting.

"Why, hello," said a girl with one of the most unique looks Chiaki had seen up close—up there with Gundham. She was wearing a gothic lolita outfit, she had huge black pigtails, and her crimson eyes were acute. She looked like a doll that had become a real person.

*This girl...* thought Chiaki, feeling as if she'd seen her before. Where was it?

"My name is Celestia Ludenberg; a pleasure to meet you."

*Is that real?* Chiaki had only heard names like that in medieval fantasy games. "You're Japanese, right?"

"Hehe, my father is French nobility, and my mother is part of a Greek family of musicians."

*That sounds like a lie.* It wasn't something she was proud of, but after spending so much time around Chisa—she could tell when someone wasn't being genuine. The gothic lolita's face looked artificial, like a mask. Even so, she doubted Celestia was a crazy murderer because Miaya would never pull that kind of cruel surprise.

"You haven't introduced yourself yet."

"I'm Chiaki Nanami."

"Well, Nanami, care to play a friendly game of Old Maid? I should warn you, however—I don't lose. I am the Ultimate Gambler, after all."

*She went to Hope's Peak Academy.* Chiaki's interest in her grew. "I was the Ultimate Gamer."

"Oh?" Celestia had a look that would suggest she was impressed, but it was difficult to tell. "Then, you must indulge me. Let's see whose talent prevails."

Not having a reason to decline, Chiaki sat across from her. Celestia took a fifty-two card deck and shuffled them so fast, Chiaki could barely follow. She shuffled in many different ways, all while making it look like child's play.

While Celestia distributed the cards, Chiaki had a question: "Which class were you a part of?"
"I was in the seventy-eighth class."

Chiaki gasped. The gamer recalled where she had seen Celestia now. She was in the mutual killing game. This girl...has already died. Knowing she was having a conversation with someone no longer alive made things more awkward.

"Is something the matter?" Celestia asked, her eyes examining the gamer like an instruction manual. "You look troubled."

"...It's nothing. How did gambling become your talent?"

"It's a thrilling tale. In order to achieve my ultimate goal, I decided to obtain money through gambling. I'm done things such as high stakes games of poker, Russian Roulette, and competing in dangerous underground gambling rings. I was so infamous, I earned the name Queen of Liars. No amount of money was safe from me."

Chiaki felt embarrassed to talk about her talent after hearing that kind of backstory. "I just played games every day and won a few tournaments..."

"Hehe, I suppose we all have to start from somewhere. One of my first games was against the prime minister of a prominent country. I almost got him to bet his whole country, but his advisers talked him out of it. I won easily, but was sad at what I could've had."

I can't tell a lie from what's real... The way Celestia talked was so smooth, it was hard to tell honesty from dishonesty. Her exploits seemed unreal, but she conveyed them so naturally. Everything from her expression to her odd accent was off-putting. It was only right that the Ultimate Gambler would have a phenomenal poker face.

"You seem to have had obstacles in your past as well," said Celestia, her gaze more serious. The two had already begun to empty their hands of pairs. "You have the look and feel of a person who's been through much. I've gone against many types like this before."

"...Something bad happened to my classmates; it was my fault. I was the class representative they trusted, and I let them down."

"Class representative; that's impressive." Celestia held out her hand, allowing Chiaki to pick a card.

"All I did was help everyone get along."

"I wouldn't expect that kind of mediation and industrial skill from an avid gamer. How did you pull it off?"

"I...did what came naturally."

"No." Celestia's grin widened. "You adapted."

"Huh?"

"In life, it's not uncommon to find oneself in a situation that's different from our normal experience. Think of it like a video game, meaning you have to constantly adjust your strategy to be successful. If you cannot adjust your methods and thinking...only failure awaits. It will lead to an inglorious death in the gutters, and you'll have no one to blame but yourself."

Chiaki frowned at Celestia's comments. "That's harsh."
"Hehe, that only further validates what I'm saying. Our world is cruel, tough, and unforgiving. Life itself is a big gamble." Celestia gazed at Chiaki with resolute eyes. "If one cannot adapt, they will lose this game of survival."

The gamer—with the number of cards in her hand continuing to shrink—didn't argue. If anyone knew how brutal the world could be, it was her. She wished Celestia's sentence wasn't valid, but it sounded rationally pessimistic. "I still ended up losing to...her, in the end."

"Then you must reflect on why you lost. Be thankful you still have a place on the board, and ask yourself an important question..." Celestia leaned forward. "Who is your opponent in the current game you're playing?"

No response came because the gamer didn't know how to answer. Her final boss could be many things: Chisa, Ultimate Despair, the Future Foundation, Enigma, maybe even the looming shadow over her heart Junko created.

Chiaki looked at the card in her hand, which was one more than Celestia had. The Joker stared back at her, meaning this game was her loss. "...I don't know who my opponent is."

"The stakes of my gambling and your video games aren't the same—my gambling often having actual danger—but our talents are alike. With you being the Ultimate Gamer. I'm sure you'll realize who your enemy is soon." Celestia put both hands up, showing they were empty. "It appears I've won this game."

Chiaki puffed out her cheeks. "If this was a video game, I would've won."

"I highly doubt it, but I'll gladly play on your terms; perhaps we can, one day. Though, you'll have to put up actual money next time. My dream isn't going to fund itself."

"What's your dream? A gothic lolita nation?"

"Tempting, but no. I'm afraid it's too grandiose for you to comprehend. Only I and a trusted comrade know." Celestia, wiping her frilled dress, stood. Her red heels clanked against the floor as she headed to the exit. "You'd be best served to remember my wise advice; it could save your life."

Before Celestia walked out, Chiaki had one more question: "What's your real name?"

Celestia, pausing for a moment, turned to reveal her smile. "It is Celestia Ludenberg. Farewell, Chiaki Nanami." The gambler departed, leaving the gamer alone.

Before she could wonder what to do next, Chiaki felt her body become weightless and her mind drifted off.

**VVV**

In a flash of bright light, the gamer opened her eyes to see the pod she was laying in. She was back in the real world. When the top rose, she sat up and looked at Miaya.

"Well," said Usami, "what do you think?"

"...I'm not really sure."

"Haha, I guessed. You and Celestia certainly got along well."

"You saw?"
"I watched the entire thing on the monitor. That girl you met is Taeko Yasuhiro, or Celestia Ludenberg as she refers to herself. She was one of the many students who died in the mutual killing game. However, I had enough data on her to make an accurate representation of what a conversation with the original Celestia would've been like."

Chiaki stepped out of the pod before straightening her attire. "Why did you choose her?"

"I programmed multiple, but I figured the Ultimate Gamer and the Ultimate Gambler would have a good conversation, hehe."

"It was like talking to a real person in Hope's Peak. Even the smells were what I remembered."

"Yep, the Neo World Program will be the greatest therapeutic tool when it's completed. Even the most hardened Despairs can be reformed. Normally, there would be two Observers inside—Usami and a special AI.

"Special?"

"It's still being worked on, but—if we can get it right—the system should be able to read the collective unconscious of the patients; it will craft the AI's look and personality into someone they all hold deep in their hearts. It could take the form of a teacher, celebrity, or anyone."

Chiaki, similar to when Chisa told her about Izuru's reaction to her almost dying, felt hopeful. If the Neo World Program was successful, her friends could return from Junko's influence. She had no clue what consequences they'd face for their actions, but just having them back would be incredible. One thought kept crossing her mind: If they were all put in, what would the AI become…?"

VVV

The old, wooden floor creaked as Black Rider walked across them after rising from bed. The wind blew through the open window, warm air colliding with her skin. She mentally went over her task…for it wouldn't be long until she had to take action.

*It's almost time.*
Kyoko leaned back in her chair, taking a deep breath. It was morning as she was in her office working on paperwork. Since the sanctions put on her for disobeying orders were still in place, this was the most she could do. Even though she couldn't be in the field, the detective could assist her subordinates in investigations by examining reports and other documents.

While she worked, Kyoko kept looking into her personal investigation—which was Chisa. She gathered all the data she legally could, but there were no smoking guns she could find. From the outside, the housekeeper looked like an exemplary employee. Regardless, even if her accusations had gone nowhere as of now, she still held on to her doubt.

The irregularities around the mission to arrest Kitta Takara stood out; their ambush was still an ongoing investigation that had no leads. It might've seemed rudimentary to point at the handler of information and call her a suspect—Kyoko was an unquestioning believer of being innocent until proven guilty—but the detective felt there was something worth looking into.

*It's not intentional, but most of the anomalies seem to involve Nanami…* There were a few things about the gamer she hadn't deduced: why Enigma wanted Chiaki to be the one unbound during the Despara Carnival, someone wanting her to see the room containing Junko's childhood belongings, and the overall weirdness of her situation.

*I've decided to absolve her from suspicion. I went as far as telling her about my doubts of Yukizome.* After having extended interactions with the gamer, the detective just couldn't see any duplicity—at least, not in a malicious way. The trust Chiaki put in her during the mission and the way it reminded her of the pact she had with Makoto during the mutual killing game stuck in her mind.

Then, getting frustrated, she shook her head.

*I'm letting my own bias affect me too much.* While she thought a certain level of empathy was useful for a detective, she had to be careful not to let it dissuade her. As Kyoko learned and practiced, she had to seek the truth. Even if it meant there was a truth she didn't want to see, which was a possible indictment of her new rival.

Before she could ponder the matter more, the detective picked up her ringing phone. Placing it to her ear, she said, "I'm here."

"You sound unhappy," said Byakuya. "Is being cooped up making you bored?"

"I'm more annoyed than anything."

"I'll make this short, then. I wanted to make sure you didn't have any problems with the upcoming task in Towa City."

"No, I'm gone over it several times, and I think it's worth looking in to. What we're looking for is likely there. Also…"

"Is your almighty intuition acting up again? Do tell; it's my ass on the line here, after all."

Kyoko looked at some papers on her desk. "It's nothing concrete; however, I'd advise you to be especially cautious. There's something ominous about that area, even by the Despair's standards."
"Are you concerned about me? I'm touched."

"It's more like rational pessimism. Towa City is consumed with civil unrest and we've gotten some of the oddest reports on record coming from there."

"Wonderful. It's not like I had my hands full with...her. Not to mention the most support the Future Foundation have given this supposedly important mission is a few agents, little back-up, and a division leader who can't even leave her branch. Oh, and who can forget this damn toy Izayoi made."

"Toy?"

"It's some kind of weapon shaped like a microphone. Apparently, it has many uses in combat. It's a similar line of experimental weapons like VEIL, or so he said."

"Well, just do what you can. If you feel you need more reparations, notify me and I'll see what I can do."

"Got it."

After the call was over, Kyoko rubbed her forehead. Her thoughts immediately went back to her previous conundrum. It was then she thought of it from another angle. Maybe, she could be involved, and still not be guilty. Hmm... I just can't complete the picture yet...

VVV

"Yes, I think that would be best," said Kyosuke while he and Kazuo were discussing matters. It was rare for the old man to venture all the way to his office just to talk. "At this point, I doubt our numbers will dwindle much less this year—especially if the current trend keeps up. Hopefully, this will get the media to back off."

"I believe so too," said Kazuo, stroking his beard. "You know, you have never said why you wanted the position of vice chairman instead of being the chairman."

"I prefer overseeing day-to-day operations. The diplomatic matters the chairman does is more suited to you than me."

"Ah, of course. You're always keeping your mind and hands busy—a spirit of a conqueror; it fits you. From what I know of your past, it makes sense."

"Did you visit to lecture me on my living habits, Chairman Tengan?"

"Is it so wrong to want to visit a co-worker? Why, I often forget just how much power you and I share. Even the infrastructure of this very building is something only we and a few others know." Kazuo adjusted his glasses. "Why don't you pay Yukizome a visit?"

Kyosuke raised an eyebrow, caught off guard by that suggestion. "Why would I need to do that?"

"It could be good for two reasons: I'm sure she's still upset from the failure of rescuing those orphans, as you were—and it could improve morale. We've had this organization for over a year, and you've never personally visited a side branch once. It's useful to show your subordinates you think of them as more than just pawns on a board."

The vice chairman pinched the bridge of his nose. Honestly, the thought of flying hundreds of miles just to raise morale annoyed him. Still, he said, "I'll think about it."
"I'm glad." The old man rose, walking to the door in his usual hunched manner.

While at the door, Kyosuke said, "Mitarai has been here often over these last few months. Just what are you two working on?"

"Oh, that? It's—" Kazuo turned his head, smiling at the vice chairman. "—a little test to see how far the despair has gotten."

The chairman walked out, leaving Kyosuke puzzled. Regardless, his thoughts were dominated by whether to leave or not. He believed that, if he had to, a simple phone call to Chisa would suffice. Even so, there was another part of him that didn't mind too terribly. There were no pressing matters, and it was true he hadn't visited any of the side branches.

Finally, after sighing, he picked up his phone and dialed his secretary. "Reschedule today's events. I'll be using the remainder of the day to travel to the Fifth and Thirteenth Division base."

VVV

Chiaki woke from slumber and attended to her job like she always did. Amazingly, things had started to improve since her earlier days in the Future Foundation. The mammoth loads of paperwork she'd receive were greatly lessened. Chisa had become much more lenient after her victory over Kitta. The daily despair video exposures had gotten less frequent, and the housekeeper was absent often.

Today, actually, was one of the first days in a while the duo was training in the dojo.

"Remember, my dear," said Chisa, "silent as a mouse."

The housekeeper stood in the middle of the room, kendo stick in hand and eyes closed. The object of this exercise was to see whether Chiaki could be quiet enough to hit her without Chisa knowing when to counter.

*I'll hit her from the side*, thought Chiaki, holding a kendo stick as well. Not once has she'd been able to hit her former teacher without letting herself be heard. This is one activity Chisa made her do the gamer didn't mind. She wasn't one for violence—except if it was a game—but the thought of hitting Chisa was cathartic.

The gamer stalked across the floor, breathing in light breaths. Blocking out any outside thoughts, she focused on her one goal. She managed to get in range without being heard. Feeling as if she was close enough, Chiaki was ready to strike Chisa on the arm. Her excitement rose while she practically tasted victory. Today was the day she'd hit her.

It wasn't to be. Before she could land her hit, Chisa hit her on the side. Chiaki gasped when she hit the floor, once again failing to strike her. Smarting, Chiaki said, "You must've cheated…"

"Did not; you got too careless when you thought you'd win. Sloppy, sloppy."

"Why do I need to learn this? I never did kendo, and I don't plan on being a ninja."

"They're handy skills to have. Take it from the former Ultimate Housekeeper: you never know when you'll find yourself faced with a lunatic."

"… Like you?" Chisa bopped Chiaki on the temple with her kendo stick. Feeling a bump forming, the gamer rubbed her head.
"Touché. Training is good for you; it builds character."

"I've had enough character building, then." Chiaki rose and wiped herself off. "I promised to help Kimura today, so I need to go."

"We're done, so that's fine." While Chiaki walked away, Chisa said, "Be careful today."

The gamer raised an eyebrow, not knowing what Chisa was inferring. "Are you gonna do something?"

"No…it's a precaution. The clouds look ominous today, if you know what I mean."

"… I don't know what you mean."

"Forget it. I'm probably tired from the lack of sleep I've gotten lately."

Saving herself a headache and leaving it at that, Chiaki decided not to ask any more questions.

After she took a shower and got changed, Chiaki headed for the R&D department. Things were active in her base today with both Ryouta and Seiko visiting. Having some spare time, Ryouta came by to show Aoi more of his work. The swimmer had loved it the last time and wanted to see more.

Seiko announced she was coming weeks ago to help out with things, prompting Chiaki to volunteer her assistance. She'd forget because the two hardly talked, but the pharmacist was a vital component to her surviving; it only felt right to help her when needed. She was also one of the division leaders who's shown support for her since the beginning.

Walking to her destination, Chiaki happened to come across Yuuji Minoru—a brilliant hacker and all-around prodigy with tech—in the hallway and said, "Has Kimura arrived yet?"

"Yeah, she arrived an hour ago. She's already at R&D."

"I meant to go earlier, but Ms. Yukizome held me up." Based on Chisa's ominous words, Chiaki decided to ask Yuuji a question. "Have you noticed anything strange today?"

Scratching his head, Yuuji said, "It's been quiet around our sector today; not even a peep. I don't know if it's foreboding or fortunate, but this has been one of the most peaceful days I can remember. Do you think something's up?"

"… No, just checking."

"Also, we just got word from headquarters: the vice chairman is coming today."

She thought it was a joke at first until she realized Yuuji wasn't the type to take something like this lightly. "Why?" was all she could ask.

"No clue. There aren't any scheduled performance reviews or emergencies. Heck, even if there was, I still don't know why Vice Chairman Munakata sees fit to come in person."

*He's never done this before…* Feeling as if something could be amiss, the gamer began to get worried. *Was this what Ms. Yukizome was talking about? "Thanks, Minoru."

"No problem. Good day, Ms. Nanami."

Kyosuke visiting was startling news, but until he arrived—there wasn't a reason to make rash
assumptions. It could've been he had some personal business with Chisa or Seiko. Deciding it was best to leave it at that, Chiaki resumed her walk to the R&D department.

R&D was one of the few departments Chiaki hadn't visited. She strolled by once but decided not to explore. If games taught her anything, there would be mega-smart scientist inventing insane things and experimenting. Being the former Ultimate Gamer, she didn't feel as if her resume qualified her to be among such company.

After talking with the woman at the counter, Chiaki was told the lab number Seiko would be at. It didn't take long for her to locate the room and, as expected, she found the pharmacist working on something. Careful not to interrupt her, Chiaki said, "Kimura?"

"Oh, Nanami," said Seiko while she was in the middle of pouring a strange green substance in a beaker filled with a bubbling liquid. "How are you?"

"Fine. I'm here to help like I said I would."

Seiko looked at the ceiling, as if she was trying to recall a lost memory. Then her eyes widened. "I remember now. You don't have to help if you're busy. I'll be okay on my own."

"I have free time today, so it's cool." Chiaki eyed the bubbling substance because it looked to be overflowing the beaker. "Um…is that supposed to happen?"

"Hmm?" Seiko looked down and started panicking. "Oh, my!"

Once that mishap was taken care of, Seiko instructed Chiaki on wearing the proper gear for safety purposes. The gamer watched as the pharmacist would handle various substances and chemicals she couldn't identify. The only part she played was holding or retrieving an item Seiko needed. Chiaki was half-afraid she'd make Seiko mess up and mix two things that would blow them up, but no such phenomenon happened.

A few hours passed before the duo stopped and took a rest. Chiaki, glad to be off her feet, said, "I didn't think this would be so tiring…"

"Sorry," said Seiko, handing Chiaki a bottle of pink liquid. "I get carried away."

The gamer's eyes lit up. "Is this an elixir of vitality that will restore me instantly?" Excited, she took the bottle and gulped the contents down. She waited for her fatigue to disappear, but it didn't. "Huh, it didn't work…and it tasted a lot like marmalade."

"…Because it is marmalade."

"Oh…" Chiaki felt embarrassed she let her active mind go haywire again. Shaking it off, she continued. "I didn't think you did these types of things. It's like a laboratory one of those mad scientists would have."

"If you're going to master medicine, it's essential to have an understanding of elements, compounds, matter, and how they can correlate with each other. It's why I made sure to refine my knowledge as a chemist."

"Whoa." Chiaki deemed Miaya as the smartest person she knew, but Seiko's acumen sounded just as impressive. "You're really talented."

Wearing a mask didn't stop Chiaki from being able to tell the pharmacist was grinning ear to ear. She usually had a docile, almost sickly expression; her whole demeanor changed to pure joy from
simple praise. It was then Chiaki remembered Miaya telling her how much Seiko loved being complimented.

"Thank you. Do you like chemistry or some other branch of science?"

Staring at the table, Chiaki tried to decide. "I've fought and befriended aliens, in games. Does that count?"

"Well... that's science fiction, so I'm afraid it doesn't. Though, there are plenty of neat things—even neater than aliens—you can engineer with chemistry: cures for illnesses, treatment for terminal conditions—"

"—performance enhancers that can make you really strong?"

"Exactly! I've developed some myself."

"Cool..." Looking away, Chiaki felt awkward and guilty because she knew Chisa took some. What's more, was she still had a syringe on her person at this very moment. "Why did you become interested in medicine?"

Seiko looked surprised. "You want to hear that?"

"Is it too personal?"

"No, it's just I've never really been asked." The pharmacist scratched her cheek before continuing. "Let's see... My grandfather was very ill when I was young, so I would often visit the hospital. After spending much time with him, I wanted to learn how to help sick people. I read many medical journals, looked up and asked for advice from doctors, and began looking into chemistry."

"Reminds me of how Miaya discovered her talent."

"I'd argue Gekkogahara had more natural talent because she honed hers before studying psychology, and I had to study before I started. Even so, yes, we are similar; she heals the mind while I heal the body. It's likely why Munakata, Yukizome, and Sakakura wanted to recruit us."

"You two would make an awesome team. Were you friends in Hope's Peak Academy?"

"No, we weren't in the same class. I... had two friends..."

Chiaki was puzzled upon seeing her expression turn melancholic. "Who were they?"

The pharmacist looked to the side, as if she was wondering whether to tell her. "Ruruka and Sohnosuke, though he normally wouldn't talk. We were childhood friends."

She wasn't expecting those names. The picture of the flamboyant confectioner and docile pharmacist being close was an odd image. Chiaki wondered what they'd even talk about. Not only were there personalities different, their talents seemed to contrast, too. "Really?"

"Strange, I know. In retrospect, I'm not sure how much of a friendship it was. Most of it was Ruruka talking to me whenever she needed a favor."

I can see that. She didn't dislike Ruruka, but even she couldn't deny Seiko's characterization of her; the first time they met, the confectioner forced her into a debt she's still paying to this day. "Why keep being friends if she was using you?"

"... At the time, I just wanted a friend. Even if I knew I was being used, it was nice for someone to
acknowledge my talent. I'm sure you can imagine how unpopular chemistry and medicine was to kids."

Chiaki couldn't deny because neither were big conversation starters for her. Though, she didn't remember talking about anything not related to games when she was younger—or even just a few years ago.

"She's manipulative, ill-mannered, and vindictive…but at times—I've seen glimpses of a better person. If she'd use her talent for the betterment of others instead of cheating and inflating her ego, it'd be better. Honestly, she needs to get over herself and stop being so entitled."

"What broke your friendship?"

"It had to do with the bombing incident our second year."

Chiaki's eyes broadened, remembering the infamous event. "You were involved in that?"

"Unfortunately…" Seiko closed her eyes. This was obviously something she didn't like remembering. "Earlier that day, a boy needed a laxative. I can't recall his name… He had fluffy, white hair and was always being very polite. I believe he was a first-year."

Wait… An inkling started coming to her. "Nagito Komaeda, you mean?"

Seiko looked like a memory came back to her. "Yeah, I think that was it. It took me a long time to realize, but the laxative he wanted somehow got mixed up with something Ruruka needed for her cooking… which the judges happened to eat. That wasn't even the weirdest thing—"

While Seiko talked, an idea was forming in Chiaki's head—an idea that seemed too ridiculous to be true but seemed to fit more and more as Seiko was explaining. Don't tell me that Komaeda trying to postpone our exams is responsible for this... There's no way his luck could've—"

"—I'm still not sure how this happened, but a detonator for a bomb got into my bag. Ruruka and I accidentally set it off and… we got in so much trouble. No one died, but us three were expelled. Both Ruruka and Sohnosuke blame me for both mishaps, labeling me a phony friend and a traitor…"

—his luck did… Chiaki couldn't look Seiko in the eye because of her inability to comprehend how such a series of events could happen, or rather, how such a series of unlucky events could happen. If her assertions were right, Nagito trying to postpone the classes' exams resulted in Seiko, Ruruka, and Sohnosuke getting expelled. The simple act of complaining about a test triggered the wild cycle that got three of her current co-workers in trouble.

Does this really have something to do with me too? Maybe being unlucky is my real talent…"

"Is something wrong?" asked Seiko, examining Chiaki. "You look disturbed."

"Nope," said Chiaki, doing her best to put on a straight face. "If it means anything, I consider you a friend. I mean, you did help save my life with your incredible medicine."

Once again, Seiko's expression lit up like a Christmas tree that had been plugged in. "Aww, it was nothing. I just really love saving people."

If the day ever came where the gamer had to confess to knowing about Chisa, Junko, and the rest of Ultimate Despair—she'd accept it. However, for many reasons, she felt this was one thing better off being taken to her grave.
Once Seiko and Chiaki finished their pleasant—and slightly bizarre—conversation, she helped the pharmacist clean up. Seiko stressed the importance of putting everything away neatly; the last thing she wanted was another incident. After finishing, Seiko thanked her for the help and said she'd stick around the R&D department longer—so Chiaki left on her own after saying goodbye to her friend.

The following hours were uneventful. The gamer strolled around the base, had some conversations with subordinates, and played her game from time to time. With no paperwork and Chisa not having any errands for her, it was a pleasant game of killing time today. The only thing of note was the vice chairman's visit, which she had no idea what it could be about.

It was rare, but today felt nice and halcyon.

Just as she was going to find Ryouta or Aoi, Chiaki heard loud alarms go off. She immediately knew what it meant based on the type of alarm.

* level four alert! Knowing it was urgent, Chiaki ran to the command center. She saw many agents scrambling around as well. As she was running on her designated floor, she bumped into Aoi. Out of breath, she said, "What's going on!"

Aoi's hands were on her knees. "You need to come outside! Black Rider showed up out of nowhere!"

Stunned, Chiaki followed Aoi as they both dashed through the hallway until they reached the lobby. Then they ran outside under the cloudy sky and reached the gates. After passing the open gate, the duo stopped when a crowd of agents were in front of them. What's more, they were in a big circle with their weapons pointed at the center.

*What is this...? Chiaki was practically in a daze from how sudden this all was.*

In the center of the crowd stood Black Rider, wearing her black helmet. She was alone and looked unarmed. Chiaki—and by the look of it, everyone else—had no idea what was going on. The gamer worked her way through the crowd while saying "excuse me" to anyone in her way. Upon seeing it was her, they made a path while keeping an eye on Black Rider.

Soon, she was standing by her former teacher while the motionless Black Rider stood across from her. "Ms. Yukizome," she said, "what is going on?"

"I have no clue."

Looking into her face, Chiaki saw an unusual expression for her. The housekeeper looked surprised too. There wasn't devious smile or manipulative grin; she looked lost like everyone else. It could've been a fallacy, but Chiaki felt this was an honest expression. *She really doesn't know...*

Chisa had a hand on her hip. "Our guest here walked up to the gates, stood where she is, and did nothing as we surrounded her. Meanwhile, she's been silent the whole time." Chisa took a step forward. "Why are you here? Does this mean you want to cooperate?"

At first, the woman in the black suit didn't move. Then she slowly stuck out her arms, just like someone would when handcuffs were being placed on them. "I want to be interrogated by you—" Black Rider turned towards Chiaki. "—and her."

*Huh? The situation's weirdness escalated even further for the gamer. Why does she want to see*
“Think again, Despair trash!” yelled a man. “You're in no position to make—"

"Okay," said Chisa, causing multiple gasps to ensue. Black Rider was outnumbered, and there were guns trained on her from all directions. Yet, Chisa was caving into her demands.

"But…mam, our protocol says to—"

"I know; I'm improvising based on the circumstances and my better judgment. Now handcuff the suspect and escort her to the interrogation room, carefully."

Many of the agents looked at each other, not knowing whether to comply or argue. After a few seconds, begrudgingly, Black Rider was handcuffed. A whole convoy of agents escorted her inside.

Chiaki stared at the housekeeper, still unsure if her confession was genuine. "You're going to get in a lot of trouble for this. Munakata will intervene the moment he gets here…"

"I'm aware." Chisa gave her an inscrutable look. Before walking towards the base herself, she said, "As I said, I'm improvising."

*What's she up to?* Too many questions had appeared: Black Rider's intentions, Chisa's intentions, and what would happen during the interrogation she had to attend.

Aoi looked worried. "Are you going through with this?"

"… If we can get Black Rider to cooperate—I think it's worth a shot."

"Ugh, it seems like danger always finds you." Erasing her previous look, Aoi smiled. "I've got your back; I'll ask to stand guard outside."

Chiaki grinned back. "Thanks, Hina."

**VVV**

The first order of business was to check Black Rider for any weapons or wires. A search concluded she didn't have any weapons or communication devices on her. The only object considered a possible threat was the helmet, which didn't come off. When asked how to remove it, Black Rider remained silent. When told this, Chisa dismissed it by saying there was no resistance she could put up while she was bounded.

Next, agents were sent to search the building and perimeter for any allies or bombs. So far, nothing of the sort had been reported. Seemingly, Black Rider walked to the Future Foundation base with nothing but the clothes on her back.

Now Chiaki, Chisa, and Black Rider were in the interrogation room. They use the one on the restricted floor for maximum safety. Aoi and another agent were stationed outside the door, in case something went wrong. The room itself was like something out of a police drama: a dim light above, a lone steel table with scratches that meant it had some rather violent history, and the interrogators and suspect sitting on opposite sides.

To the gamer, this was all beyond strange.

*Why would she just…turn herself in?* Chiaki kept asking herself this. Even though there was plenty back-up and Black Rider was handcuffed, her heart was beating ferociously—as if it could sense
discord about to happen.

"So," said Chisa, stone-faced, "you've been granted your interrogation with us. Given that, I hope you'll answer my questions."

Black Rider was silent.

"Let's start with this: why did you come here?"

Just when Chiaki thought she'd not answer again, Black Rider said, "To take her."

Chiaki shifted in her chair when Black Rider pointed at her. The gamer took notice of how toneless her voice was. It seemed like she was making a conscious effort not to let any emotion be heard. "Why me?" asked Chiaki.

"Because I was ordered."

"By who?"

"Enigma said to do it now…but the original order was given by Junko Enoshima."

Upon hearing that name, Chiaki's heart did a somersault. She was close to asking Black Rider to repeat herself because the answer was too unbelievable. "Is she saying…?"

"How is that possible?" asked Chisa. "Junko Enoshima committed suicide…unless you know something we don't…""

Black Rider was silent for a second. "Junko Enoshima is dead."

This situation was making her hairs stand on end, but hearing that sentence gave some reprieve to Chiaki's nerves. However, Black Rider's claim raised even more questions.

"... I see." Chisa intertwined her fingers. "Enoshima gave you an order involving Chiaki before her suicide. Why?"

"I don't know."

Chisa leaned back and rubbed her forehead, looking as if her frustrations were rising. "You know what, I started with the wrong question. Let's try again." With haunting eyes, Chisa leaned forward and said, "Who are you?"

Chiaki expected Black Rider not to answer. Instead, the mysterious woman turned her head before she said, "You'll have to remove my helmet. There are buttons you must press in a specific order; I'll tell you it."

A clanking sound could be heard because Chisa kept poking the table with her nails. She was clearly deliberating among herself. "... Couldn't you just tell me your name?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Even after you see my face, I doubt you'll accept what you see."

While Chisa continued to look as if she was thinking, Chiaki's pulse grew. Clearly, knowing Black Rider's identity was important—but the gamer felt seeing her face would make things worse. She didn't know why.

"Fine," said Chisa, leaning over the table.
Black Rider began saying what buttons to push and how to push them. Then the enigmatic woman began telling her the order.

*Why am I so afraid…?*

Complying, Chisa pressed the buttons as Black Rider instructed.

*She's handcuffed and outnumbered.*

Black Rider told Chisa the final button to push.

*It'll be some stranger, just like Kitto Takara was. But, still… why—*

Chisa pushed the last button before hearing a click. Slowly, she lifted the helmet.

—*do I want to close my eyes and run away…?*

The helmet was now fully removed, revealing Black Rider's face. In those moments, the world seemed to stop spinning. Upon seeing her face, Chisa was expressionless and Chiaki was shocked. Honestly, "shocked" was a word that didn't do justice to what she was feeling.

Chiaki refused to believe what she saw.

After the helmet was removed, the woman's jet-black hair flowed far past her shoulders; it looked unkempt. Her blue eyes had a lavender glow to them, and her gaze was bone-chilling—as if it belonged to a feral predator. Her hair was longer, her features were more mature…but both Chiaki and Chisa knew whose face it belonged to.

"Well," said Chisa, maintaining her blank look, "this a surprise…Mukuro Ikusaba."

*T-this can't be…* Chiaki had to breathe out of her mouth because her heartbeat was so erratic. In front of her was the face of Junko Enoshima's sister, the woman who lobotomized her teacher, and the former Ultimate Soldier and Despair Sister herself. The gamer couldn't recall a time when her mind stopped working. It was if her brain couldn't decide what emotion to use for this situation.

"Of course," said Chisa, "that's assuming you're the *real* Mukuro Ikusaba. Recently, there was an attack including a bunch of copycat killers inspired by you; they even dressed as you. How do I know you're not another phony?"

Mukuro looked right into Chisa's eyes. "Do I look fake?"

Mukuro closed her eyes. "It was a red herring prepared to advance the game. I was never even in the mutual killing game. The reason is—" Mukuro's demon-like gaze sent a chill through the room. "—everything was conducted by me: the Tragedy, the killing game, all of it. In truth, Junko was *my* subordinate… I'm the true Ultimate Despair."

*W-what…?* The gamer felt like a robot whose brain was overheating. For so long, the true face of her despair was Junko. Now, Mukuro—if she was real—was saying she was the true mastermind. The blond fashionista might not have been the main catalyst for her suffering. *I-I don't…*

"Hahaha!" laughed Chisa, grabbing her sides. "Well, isn't this something?" On a dime, her smile and laughter vanished. Instead, the malevolent atmosphere in the room grew stronger. "I have no
clue what this means…”
Save the Persona Non Grata

A lone girl walked through a desert, the sun scorching the sand with its brilliant rays. The girl had gotten used to extreme conditions like this. She had been through it all: blazing deserts, dense forests, endless caves, and much more. Throughout the endeavors, her will had become as solid as the strongest iron—molded through many years of hardship.

Loneliness. This was the existence of the girl whose only purpose was destruction. Never nurturing or creating—but killing and slaughtering. Her life was following orders and achieving her goals, no matter the cost. It didn't matter to her if she had to traverse over a mountain of bodies to get to it, even if those bodies were placed there by her.

However, no matter where she was, her life had one ultimate purpose… It was to maintain the smile of the one she loved the most. To preserve that person's happiness, she'd do anything—even destroy the entire world.

So, the lone girl walked through the desert; no purpose of her own nor any meaning to be found. All her life was devoted to the person who told her she mattered. Despite the girl being fully aware of this, and fully accepting of it, she couldn't help but occasionally think of the words her mentor said once.

"When I look at you, I can't help but get depressed," he said.

Whenever that thought came, she'd shake her head and discard it. With her convictions at her back, she carried on her bloody and desolate path—just as the one who mattered to her most said to do. For that by itself…was her reason for living.

VVV

Is this real…?

That thought was on constant replay in Chiaki's head. Just hours ago, she was strolling around the division and having a pleasant chat with Seiko. Now, Mukuro Ikusaba—if she was real—was sitting across from her. The former Ultimate Soldier and Despair Sister herself may have been alive all along.

The gamer doubted she'd ever forget looking into Mukuro's eyes. They were cold and sharp, like a blade. It was a gaze of an unrestrained animal that had caused death and despair all her life. Undoubtedly, this woman had killed many people—and had done it with the efficiency of a surgeon. Even though she was handcuffed, Chiaki felt as if the soldier could take her life whenever she wanted.

She badly sought to convince herself this was a fake, but it was hard. Even Chisa seemed to be at a loss. One look revealed the resemblance she had to Junko; even the chilling aura she gave off reminded her of the fake fashionista. Chiaki never thought there could be anybody so terrifying, she'd be glad the current Chisa was next to her—but it was happening now.

Then there was Mukuro's stunning claim, saying she was the true Ultimate Despair and not Junko. Chiaki didn't know what was true, what was fake, or if the woman in front of her was a fake. All she knew was this meant nothing good.

"My, my," said Chisa, using her intertwined fingers as a rest, "what a development this is. According to you, you're the mastermind behind the Tragedy—not Junko Enoshima?"
Mukuro, her expression stagnant, said, "Yes."

"Hard to believe with all the evidence to the contrary. Enoshima's appearance in the mutual killing game, traces found at various crime scenes, and the Despair's undying worship of her." Chisa narrowed her eyes. "She's the one who ordered you to lobotomize me, brainwash my class, and execute my Chiaki."

As her stomach was full of knots, Chiaki shuffled her hands. Even if it was a fake, having the face of Mukuro Ikusaba in front of her made memories of her execution day arise more vividly than it had in a long time.

"It was all orchestrated," said Mukuro. "Our goal was to make my sister seem like the mastermind and me her subordinate. That way, when my fake would die in the mutual game, the Future Foundation would write it off as Junko casting aside her pawn of a sister. It helped advance the game, and convinced you all I was dead."

"And why follow Enoshima's orders to kidnap Chiaki if you're in charge?"

"It was in a letter she wrote to me before her death. She told me to do two things: protect Kitta, for a time—and come for Chiaki Nanami when Enigma told me." Mukuro looked down, still not showing any particular emotion. "I wanted to…grant her final wish."

"I see; who is Enigma, then…?"

"I don't know."

Sighing, Chisa sat back. She didn't look angry or upset, rather, she looked annoyed. "Why was Enoshima the one leading the killing game?"

"Because I told her to, and she was willing to do it."

The housekeeper rubbed her forehead. "So let's go over this: you're the real Mukuro Ikusaba who faked her death and have returned to take Chiaki. This was something Junko Enoshima told you to do, who is actually a faux mastermind. In actuality, you're the original Ultimate Despair—the true composer behind the Tragedy."

Chisa proceeded to laugh, making Chiaki raise an eyebrow. Mukuro continued to show no reaction. After the housekeeper stopped, she said, "I think I'm understanding what all this means now. Still —"

"I want to ask something," said Chiaki. The gamer couldn't deny feeling tense once Mukuro's sharp eyes met hers. However, there was something she wanted to know. "Why did you do everything you did?"

"For despair, just like my sister."

*That isn't right.* "I don't believe that."

Staring back at her, Chiaki could see the faintest twitch of Mukuro's eye—signaling she'd been caught off guard by Chiaki's response. "What do you mean?"

Putting a finger to her chin, Chiaki thought about how to articulate herself. So far, this interrogation was like firing a gun with infinite ammo; no matter what question was fired, there always seemed to be a new one loaded in the chamber. The truth was unknown to the gamer, but for some reason—Mukuro claiming her motive was the same as Junko's set something off in her.
"When I met Junko," said Chiaki, "I believed that she believed despair was all there was to her. While you do give off a similar vibe…it's not the same. It just feels different. It reminds me more of Pekoyama, I think…"

Mukuro closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm a soldier; I've been on battlefields where suffering and hardship was normal. During my time with Fenrir, I saw every inhuman act you can think of. Eventually, it occurred to me: despair is all there is. Harmony, peace, hope—they're all lies created so humanity can cope with the fact we're a species meant to die. If everyone accepted despair and stopped lying to themselves, we as a species can truly live and evolve. That is why I live for despair."

There was an extended silence after Mukuro finished her long statement. Obviously, a woman like her who's been through life and death combat in hostile conditions since she was young would know what the vulgar sins of the world look like. Her words an expression held a strong conviction behind them. It was hard to assume any dishonesty from her tone. But even so…

"I still can't believe you were behind everything."

The soldier showed what looked to be confusion or frustration while Chisa sat back and grinned at the gamer. Chiaki herself didn't know why she had the urge to counter Mukuro, but she wanted to do it, nonetheless.

"Junko didn't seem like the kind of person to work for anyone." Chiaki averted her eyes. "Asahina and Kirigiri would tell me stories of how, while you were quiet and distant, you'd be quick to help others. Even Naegi said nice things about—"

An odd development made Chiaki pause. The moment she said Makoto's name, she saw the former Ultimate Soldier's eyes widen before she quickly regained composure. It happened so fast, the gamer thought she imagined it; Chisa's giggling told her she didn't. What was that about?

Before Mukuro spoke, Chiaki thought her eyes seemed a little softer. "All your accusations are baseless. Junko and I wanted them all to believe we were friends. I don't care about any of them, nor do I care about them now. If my former classmates were in front of me, I'd kill them all without feeling a thing. The only person I loved and cared about making happy…is gone."

"That's why I don't believe you're the mastermind. I think, even if she really loved them, Junko would use it for despair. It doesn't seem like despair has anything to do with the way you care for someone. You adored your sister and wanted to make her happy." Chiaki's gaze intensified. "That tells me you're capable of truly loving someone…which I don't think Junko ever could."

This time, Mukuro's loss of composure was obvious. The soldier seemed as if she could swat off her emotions and become apathetic whenever she wanted—a skill she likely developed for killing. However, right now Chiaki's words, at the very least, seemed to have struck a cord.

Once more, Chisa laughed. "Are you seeing it now, Ikusaba? Are you seeing why your sister was afraid of this girl? Chiaki talked to both you and Enoshima for short periods and she's already managed to—"

A loud noise made Chiaki jump. Mukuro had slammed her bounded hands on the steel table, adding a dent. The soldier slowly looked up, a gaze full of death. Chiaki felt her skin crawl. It was like Mukuro could physically instill fear with a simple glance.

"If looks could kill," said Chisa, teasingly.
With the eyes of a wolverine, Mukuro said, "Enough. As I've said, I've come for Chiaki Nanami."

"Oh, and how will you accomplish that? I'm disappointed knowing this was the best you could do. When I think of the actions I'd expect the Ultimate Soldier to take, methods such as espionage, infiltration, and subterfuge come to mind. Yet, all you did was allow yourself to be captured."

"I like my chances."

"You know… I'm happy this is what you've chosen to do. I'm also really hoping you are the real Mukuro Ikusaba."

Swiftly, Chisa pulled out her knife. Then she leaned over the table and grabbed Mukuro by the collar. Chiaki gasped, not knowing what was about to follow. It was hard to tell what's scarier: Mukuro's cold gaze or Chisa's sadistic one.

Chisa's face was mere inches from Mukuro's. "If you're real, then you're quite impressive. The invincible former Ultimate Soldier; raised on the battlefield, never suffering a single injury. You don't know what physical pain feels like, do you? I am a former teacher, so allow me to educate you."

The housekeeper placed the tip of the blade on Mukuro's cheek. She began to slowly drag the blade across her face. Mukuro had no reaction at first, but she began wincing—clearly in pain from the sharp object slicing her skin. The reaction seemed to entertain Chisa that much more. With one last quick swipe, Mukuro grunted as a bleeding cut now adorned the left side of her face.

"Aww," said Chisa, "looks like that amazing accolade has ended. It's funny how, given the number of lives you've taken, you haven't had to go through feeling what cold steel piercing your skin feels like. Doesn't feel very good, right?"

Chisa shoved Mukuro back into the chair. The soldier glared at the housekeeper, her cut still bleeding.

"I remember how you—if that was you—lobotomized me. That wasn't so pleasant. So, I figured I could"—Chisa flashed her pearly teeth while she pulled out two needles—"do the same thing to you!"

Shuttering, Chiaki knew what the housekeeper had in mind. "Ms. Yukizome… you can't—"

"Why not? This is the face of the woman, or rather, the face of the bitch who lobotomized me and looked on as you were ruthlessly tortured. Isn't it poetic justice if we exact the same pain on her? Junko Enoshima isn't here, but we have the next best thing in front of us. Don't tell me you don't think she shouldn't suffer for her actions?"

"I-I…"

Chiaki didn't know what to say. If this was indeed Mukuro Ikusaba, there were undeniable facts: she played a huge role in bringing about the Tragedy, she's killed many people, and she corrupted the person who used to mean the most to her—Chisa. There were likely many other atrocities she's done. The gamer didn't think people would care if a person like Mukuro suffered.

Still, there was another part of her that couldn't accept this. Torturing Mukuro wouldn't change the past. Her friends would still be in despair, her teacher would still be insane, and her suffering would never be undone. Observing Chisa lobotomize Mukuro, she believed in her heart, would not make her feel any better.
"I don't think we should be doing this," said Chiaki. "It…it won't change anything…"

"Sure it will; I'm certain it will make me feel better. Though, I should warn you, Ikusaba: I have no clue how to lobotomize. Oh well, I'm sure I'll get the hang of it…eventually, hehe."

Chiaki opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She knew it was pointless to object. Chisa's chilling grin let her know she was dead set on doing this. Despite the unthinkable act about to be performed on her, Mukuro wasn't showing any concern.

"Alright," said Chisa, arms behind her back, "here I come."

Turning away, Chiaki looked at the ground. She had no desire to see what was about to happen. Just as things were about to get started—an interruption occurred.

The alarms began to ring, just as they had earlier that day.

Another level four alert? Chiaki looked at Chisa, seeing her smile vanish. Mukuro, on the other hand, wasn't fazed at all…as if she was expecting this.

A man standing guard outside opened the door. "We've got trouble, mam! The Despairs have launched a full assault on the base! The reports are saying hundreds of them appeared out of nowhere!"

Before Chisa or Chiaki could react, Mukuro yelled, "Voice command: activate offensive tactics!"

Mukuro's helmet started to glow before the soldier kicked it towards the door with expert efficiency.

"Run!" yelled Chisa.

Things were happening so quickly, Chiaki couldn't follow. The next thing she knew, a deafening blast knocked her off the chair. Not knowing if anyone was dead or injured, the gamer lost consciousness.

VVV

Upon coming to, Chiaki heard a painful ringing; her eardrums felt like they were going to explode. Her vision was still blurry, so she couldn't make out the figure she saw moving. Whoever it was bent down over someone's body before walking towards her. Then the gamer felt agony from her scalp as the figure pulled her hair, forcing her to stand. Now she could see who the person was. It was the only other conscious person in the room.

"Move," said Mukuro. Her hands were free, and she had gotten ahold of a handgun.

Instead of complying, Chiaki scanned the ground the see the unconscious bodies of the male agent and Chisa. The gamer didn't get a chance to wonder if they were dead before she felt Mukuro poke her in the back with the gun, making her jump.

"If you don't move"—Mukuro glared at her, a gaze much more potent up close—"I'll begin breaking your fingers."

There wasn't a doubt in the gamer's mind that wasn't a bluff. She fully believed that, not only could she do it—but she would do it, if necessary. Chiaki didn't fool herself into believing she could fight back against a person like this, so she did as told and walked towards the door.
While the two were about to exit, she heard a voice that said, "Hold it." Turning, the gamer saw Chisa stagger to her feet. She was clearly in pain, but her face had her usual smile plastered on it. Mukuro pointed her gun at the housekeeper.

"I can't let you take her, Ikusaba… She has to be the savior. Hehe, Enigma… really played this game unfairly by revealing you."

*What game?* thought Chiaki, confused.

Mukuro, not responding, fired the gun without hesitation. Time slowed down for the gamer as she watched her former teacher fall face down. She wasn't moving.

"… Ms. Yukizome?" murmured Chiaki, not blinking.

The same emotions she felt upon seeing Chisa being shot in the orphanage arose: fear, sadness, and pain. All the housekeeper's atrocities seemed to vanish like water under the desert sun. She wanted to run to her. However, with Mukuro in the way, she might as well have been a whole continent apart.

"Ms. Yukizome!" yelled Chiaki.

Bluntly, Mukuro grabbed her by the collar and pulled the gamer along. After being yanked into the hallway, she was pushed forward so suddenly, she fell. As Chiaki picked herself up, she spotted Aoi leaning against the wall. It looked like the explosion affected her as well.

"Boss, what hap—" Once Aoi's eyes drifted to the person behind Chiaki, the swimmer's mouth fell open. She stared at Mukuro like she was seeing a ghost. Actually, she probably thought she *was* seeing a ghost. "I-Ikusaba…?"

Mukuro stared back at her, not showing any reaction. "Asahina."

"B-but—how can you… Are you the real…" Aoi looked down at Chiaki, undoubtedly noticing the dread in her eyes. Then she looked back at Mukuro. It was clear Aoi's mind must be racing. Seeing the face of a woman she thought was dead, and a person who acted as her friend must've been near the top of her "I can't believe this is happening" list—a tough feat.

"Stand aside," said Mukuro. The soldier's voice carried a sharp tone. It was apparent she'd meet resistance with lethal force.

Aoi looked at Chiaki, then at the ground, and finally back at Mukuro. Despite her clear confusion and fear, Aoi put a hand on her chest before she said, "I'm not doing that, Ikusaba—or whoever the hell you are. I won't move from this spot!"

After that outburst, Mukuro aimed the gun at the swimmer. Seeing where this was progressing, Chiaki said, "Run away… If you don't, she'll kill you. I'll be fine." Trying her best to put on a front, Chiaki forced a smile. *Please just go…*

Her knees were shaking, she looked terrified, and it was clear she had no plan to counter Mukuro—yet, Aoi continued to stand her ground. "No can do, Boss. I'm tired… of my friends dying while I sit back and watch. After the mutual killing game, I decided to do my best to keep that stuff from happening again. So… I ain't running away!"

Narrowing her eyes, Mukuro fired.

Screaming in pain, Aoi fell—grabbing her right leg. After her initial shock settled down, Chiaki
realized Mukuro shot her leg. Aoi looked to be in major pain, but it wasn't anything life-threatening.

*She didn't kill her…?* Feeling Mukuro shove her, Chiaki was forced to press forward. The gamer stared at her ailing subordinate as she passed.

"N-no," said Aoi, breathing through her teeth. She reached out to Chiaki, unable to even stand. Whether it was from the pain or from seeing her friend being taken away, tears began falling from the swimmer's eyes.

"Don't worry, Hina," said Chiaki, putting on another forced smile. "I'm sure it'll work out." Her subordinate's face disappeared behind the corner as she walked with Mukuro at her back.

The walk was as comfortable as one would expect. The gamer felt like she was walking on pins and needles. At any given moment, Mukuro could end her life or inflict severe pain. Somehow, it felt like the gravity of this situation hadn't fully sunk in yet. Right now, the woman who was potentially the real Mukuro Ikusaba had her a gunpoint.

Finally, they arrived at the elevator. After taking Chiaki's ID card—it was necessary to operate the elevator on the restricted floor—she placed it on the scanner.

A minute passed before the doors opened. Chiaki went inside, followed by Mukuro. She saw the soldier push the button for the top floor. Why she wanted to go there was a mystery to her. Guessing, she assumed there was a helicopter or some other kind of transportation for Mukuro there.

*My head…* This predicament was making an uncomfortable sensation in her head persist. The images of her execution were barraging her like a hail storm. Being in the elevator, right next to the woman who was possibly Mukuro Ikusaba—it was becoming too much for her. The gamer wished for anything to happen so she could escape this. The elevator might as well have been moving through molasses. She thought of anything: games, her friends, Miaya's words, and anything else that might comfort her.

It was then, she came to a realization.

*My hands are free, I have VEIL, and I still have a syringe left. Maybe, if I'm careful, there's a chance I could—*

One look at Mukuro made her plan evaporate. The soldier was looking directly ahead, eyes hidden behind her long hair. She wasn't even facing the gamer. Just like that, Chiaki understood why Mukuro wasn't constantly watching and why she didn't bother handcuffing her. The answer was clear and bitter.

… *I'm no match for her. Even with a performance enhancer, she'd tear me apart...*

The thick aura of malice the soldier gave off felt palpable. The gamer knew if she attempted to resist—her life would be over in a second. Being close to Mukuro felt as if death itself was with her, like she was on the edge of a skyscraper while a hundred mile per hour typhoon was ravaging the earth. This woman might be a fake, but as far as Chiaki was concerned—it didn't matter.

To her, this was the real Mukuro Ikusaba.

*It's like I'm still at level five, and she's all the way at level ninety-nine... A complete gap in strength. If Pekoyama couldn't defeat her, what chance do I have...?*
As they reached the first floor, the elevator stopped and the lights cut off. Chiaki wasn't surprised, but being in a dark, closed space with Mukuro next to her wasn't the most enjoyable feeling.

"What happened?" asked Mukuro.

"Because of the attack, they probably cut the power to the elevator."

"Open the door."

Following demands, Chiaki slid the doors open. Immediately, she was met with two Future Foundation agents with their weapons pointed at her from a few feet away. Upon seeing Chiaki, they lowered them.

"You're safe, Ms. Nanami!" happily said a young woman.

Chiaki, knowing that Mukuro was hidden, yelled, "Behind me is—"

Her warning was useless because Mukuro dispatched of both of them in a second, nailing the two perfectly in the head. It happened so swiftly, the two agents probably only saw a glimpse of their killer.

Mukuro shoved her, making the gamer proceed forward. As they walked through the hallways, Mukuro would shoot any agent that came their way. No one could get a proper shot before the invincible soldier ended them. It was a cycle of violence: walk, shoot, kill, take a gun, repeat. All the while, Chiaki was helpless to resist the Despair Sister.

This is… Chiaki gazed behind her, meeting Mukuro's eyes momentarily. They were devoid of light—eyes of a machine. A machine who had only their purpose, leaving little room for anything else. This is the sister of Junko Enoshima… Is it really her after all…?

Soon, two male Despairs—fit with the Monokuma headgear—approached Mukuro. Both of them carried bats. Their bats had visible stains of blood on it, meaning they had encountered some resistance on the way here.

"My knife," said Mukuro, reaching out her hand.

The gamer saw one of them hand Mukuro a sheathed knife. The sheath had an insignia of a wolf on it—the symbol of Fenrir, Chiaki guessed. The gamer gulped when she saw Mukuro unsheathe the large army knife. The soldier eyed the stainless steel before she said, "The elevator has been shut down. I'll have to take the stairs."

Gasping, Chiaki was shoved into the Despairs by Mukuro. Both of them firmly grabbed an arm each.

"Follow," said Mukuro, walking while Chiaki was being dragged along.

VVV

Seiko had been enjoying the afternoon until, of course, Despair's assaulted the base. While the Future Foundation was keeping many of them at bay, there were many that managed to get in.

The pharmacist ran outside the lab to assist, but there was a slight problem.

"Oh dear…" she murmured, looking around her. The moment she walked into the hallway, a big group of Despairs awaited her. On both the right and left stood Despairs with knives, bats, and
other weaponry.

*Does this have to do with Black Rider?* The pharmacist didn't know how or why this was happening; all she knew was enemies surrounded her. Removing her mask, revealing her braces—she said, "Surrender now, or I won't hold back."

None of them responded or budged. She closed her eyes, fully expecting that kind of response. The pharmacist hoped it wouldn't come to this, but she reached into her pocket and pulled out a bottle full of pills.

"I refuse to let you cause trouble here!" Seiko dumped some pills in her hand before swallowing. Immediately, just as she designed them to do, the effects could be felt. *I'll destroy them all!*

VVV

Hoping someone would interfere and stop them, Chiaki was being led by the Despairs as Mukuro carried on. The gamer knew it wouldn't be long until the door leading to the stairway arrived. At this point, she felt only a miracle could fix this. Unless Izuru himself appeared and wanted to help for some reason, she didn't know anyone who could halt the malevolent phenomenon that was Mukuro Ikusaba.

Mukuro, without warning, stopped walking. "Blood…" she murmured. "There's a strong stench of blood ahead."

A little further ahead was the lobby. Chiaki's heart sank when she thought the stench could be from the dead bodies of her subordinates. Not wanting to see the scene, she closed her eyes before being forced to walk again. There was a strange silence as they stopped once more. Anticipation getting the better of her, Chiaki peeked despise herself.

What she saw made her jaw drop.

All across the lobby lied many dead bodies—every one belonging to a Despair. There must've been at least fifty bodies. In the middle of the chaotic scene, stood a single man. He was like a white rose among a meadow of red roses, untouched and unscathed.

Eyes widening, Chiaki yelled, "Vice Chairman Munakata!"

"Nanami, you seem to be with some"—Kyosuke directed a hawk-like glare at Mukuro —"interesting company."

*Did he…do all this by himself…?* Chiaki shook off her surprise. "Black Rider was Mukuro Ikusaba, though we're not sure if she's the real one. She's trying to take me, and she shot several people…including Ms. Yukizome…"

"…Did she now?" Kyosuke looked down. "Mukuro Ikusaba, former Ultimate Soldier, if I'm to be honest—I actually hope you're the genuine article. I don't know why you're living or what you want, still"—he pointed his katana, staring at her like a lion seeing its prey—"cutting the sister of Junko Enoshima with my blade would be very cathartic."

"Kyosuke Munakata," said Mukuro, "the strongest man in the Future Foundation. For someone like you…" The soldier, tightened her black gloves, unsheathed her knife, and walked forward. "Don't interfere," she said, glancing at the two Despairs holding Chiaki. "You'd get in my way."

Gulping, Chiaki watched Mukuro approach Munakata until they were only a few feet from each other. The vice chairman stood across from the soldier, one dressed in all white and the other in all
black, standing with a backdrop of red and death around them. It looked mesmerizing in a twisted way.

"Killing you would be irresponsible," said Kyosuke, gripping his katana with both hands, "so don't expect the reprieve of death after I've painfully incapacitated you."

Mukuro held her knife in front of her. "It won't be as painful as what your Future Foundation will experience...when it burns to the ground after their mighty vice chairman is slain by me."
Heh, I played “Old World Order” in my head before this fight and when Chisa removed Mukuro’s helmet.

It was like something out of a game as Chiaki watched a clash unfold in front of her.

Actually, and she couldn’t believe this thought would ever cross her mind, but it might’ve been more impressive than what she’d seen in games. A true Goliath versus Goliath fight. The gamer, who was still being held by the two Despairs, could only be an onlooker—a fact she wasn’t too distraught about. She doubted her talent had any place in a battle like this.

I can barely keep up. The action was so rapid, Chiaki couldn’t commentate in her head. She never thought the answer to who would win between Kyosuke Munakata and Mukuro Ikusaba was something she’d get to know. However, it seemed she'd get that answer soon.

Naturally, one would assume Mukuro would be at a disadvantage because her army knife was much shorter than Kyosuke's katana. The soldier was making a great argument against it. She moved with such fluidity and precision, their weapons' lengths seemed to be a non-factor.

Her boss would swing with such power, and Mukuro would guard with her knife. So far, she had been fighting conservatively, mostly jabbing and then backing off. Chiaki guessed it was a strategy to tire him. Still, she had yet to figure out why Mukuro didn't use the gun she confiscated. It could've been she knew about Kyosuke special magnet katana, but Mukuro shouldn't have known about that…unless someone told her.

Chiaki couldn't tell if she was imagining it, but as she looked at the fight—a weird observation about Mukuro came to her. It looks almost like...she’s enjoying herself? Why would that— The gamer returned her focus to the fight after the duo separated from each other.

"If you are indeed a fake," said Kyosuke, who hadn't broken a sweat yet, "you're very convincing. The level of skill you’ve shown is what I’d expect from the real Mukuro Ikusaba."

Mukuro pushed her hair aside. “Because I’m not a fake.”
“I’m inclined to believe that now. The stench of death around you—who else could you be but the former Ultimate Soldier?”

“It’s a stench I’m sure you’re used to…considering you have it too.” Kyosuke furrowed his brow, clearly puzzled by her statement. “Our exchange gave me a good idea of who you are. You’re a killer—an unapologetic killer—just like me. No matter what suit a wolf may wear, it’ll never stop being a wolf.”

"Trying to compare us? I, who created the organization against scum like you? Hardly what I’d call ‘like-minded,’ wouldn't you say?"

Mukuro closed her eyes. “Care to explain the rise of despair activity after the Future Foundation was established, then?”

_Huh?_ Wondering what Mukuro meant, Chiaki examined her boss’s face. He looked as indifferent as ever. Not able to resist, Chiaki asked, “What do you mean; are you saying we’re partly responsible for the Tragedy?”

"Shortly after this organization began, there was a spike in violent activity related to the Despairs. Based on the statistics gathered, it’s irrefutable the two events are related. Considering the Future Foundation needed to prove to various governments and organizations they were necessary, an increase in despair would’ve been useful."

Chiaki looked at Kyosuke, not wanting to believe that. The thought of the Future Foundation making things worse for their own gain saddened her—even if it did lead to the organization becoming as prominent as it had. So, she stared at him, hoping for a firm denial.

With his face still not showing any emotion, he said, "And where did you obtain this information?"

Mukuro didn’t respond.

“Okay then, what are you trying to infer?”

"You adapt to your environment, very quickly. No matter the circumstances or cost, your goal
never changes. Tell me: when the survivors of the seventy-eight class stopped my sister—you were resentful, I'm guessing?"

Chiaki gasped under her breath and even saw a discreet twitch of Kyosuke's eye. The contempt he had for Makoto and the others was clear; they even echo it themselves.

Mukuro smiled, almost mockingly. "The reason you feel that way is because you felt as if your purpose had been stolen. For those with a mentality like us, all we care about is the mission. In that way, we're similar. At least, that is what our clash told me and prior knowledge."

What ensued next was a tense silence. The gamer didn't know how a person could tell things about another by fighting. She figured they'd both be too busy focusing on not to lose. Yet, in the gamer's opinion, Mukuro's introspection of Kyosuke sounded reasonable.

"Nanami," said Kyosuke so suddenly, the gamer flinched; his tone didn't sound aggressive. "Did Ikusaba give you an explanation of her purpose here?"

Biting her lip, Chiaki tried to paraphrase. "She wants to take me…somewhere; I don't know why. Also, she said she was the original Ultimate Despair and mastermind behind the Tragedy—not Junko Enoshima."

"Hmm, I haven't a clue about that first part—but I don't believe the last bit. The notion of this woman in front of me being the composer behind everything is comical."

The soldier narrowed her eyes. "Oh?"

"There's no mistake; all you are is a tool with one purpose: to serve. I don't see any semblance of free will or leadership. All I see is someone who has to latch on to someone more superior to live and function properly. You're just a stray hound—a mutt, one might say."

"If I am, you are as well. I ask you, Kyosuke Munakata: who was the one who put on your collar? Perhaps it was the former Ultimate Housekeeper I shot earlier?"

Oh dear, thought Chiaki. This had gone from a duel to passive-aggressive banter. It was clear: these two weren't fond of each other. It felt as if nuclear energy could be generated from all the friction between them. Oddly, they seemed to have a weird synergy in an 'I'm gonna murder this
Kyosuke, holding up his katana with a deathly glare, said, “Ready?”

Mukuro glared back at him. “Always.”

In the blink of an eye, they dashed at each other. They clashed so quickly, the gamer couldn’t follow what happened. It seemed almost supernatural. Both stood, motionless, backs facing each other. Chiaki was sure there was a clash, but there didn’t seem to be any result.

What…what happened?

“… You got me,” said Kyosuke, holding his left arm. Closer inspection revealed a nasty cut on his forearm. It looked deep, but the vice chairman showed no sign of being in pain. “However…”

Once Mukuro turned, Chiaki saw a new cut on her too. Amazingly, it was in the same place Chisa cut her earlier. The result was a cross-like wound on the left side of her face. Mukuro touched it as if to confirm she was actually hit.

“I hit you as well.”

*He really cut her.* The almost mythical fact about Mukuro never being injured in battle was something Chiaki had heard in the past. Actually seeing the seemingly invincible soldier injured in a fight—even if it was a shallow cut—really drove the point home of how exceptional her boss was.

“If you are the genuine article, you’ve gotten sloppy. Or perhaps, I’m just worthier than anyone you’ve faced before?”

Mukuro, disregarding her injury, looked like she was ready to continue. “This will be the final exchange.”

“Is that so?” Kyosuke tightened the grip on his katana. “Come at me, then.”
Mukuro rushed at him again; she swung, but her knife was parried by his blade. Then Mukuro side-stepped a swipe by him with her amazing agility. Seeing an opening, Kyosuke brought down his blade; Mukuro stopped the incoming slash with her knife. She kicked him in the gut before backing up. The two combatants eyed each other, likely trying to read the other’s body language. Then they charged forward once more.

Then Chiaki felt one of the Despairs release her arm. He pulled out his gun and aimed it at Kyosuke.

“Look out!” yelled Chiaki.

Gazing in her direction, Kyosuke spotted the Despair. He instantly stopped his progress, allowing him to evade being shot. However, he had to stop his body awkwardly; Mukuro had a huge opening to take advantage of.

*Oh no!* thought Chiaki, sure the soldier was about to kill him with her knife.

Instead, Mukuro dropped her knife before she spun behind him. She proceeded to lock her arms around his neck, putting him in an iron-clad headlock. Kyosuke struggled, but Mukuro had the hold locked in as efficiently as one could. It didn't take long for the vice chairman to finally lose consciousness. Panting, Mukuro rose, standing over his unconscious body.

After a few seconds, Mukuro faced the Despair who interfered and said, “Your gun.” Without hesitation, the Despair approached and handed it over.

The moment the weapon was in her hand, she aimed at his temple and pulled the trigger.

Chiaki gasped upon witnessing the act. There was no hesitation as the soldier ended the Despair's life. Looking away, Mukuro gestured for the remaining Despair to follow. Chiaki, confused, asked, "You're not going to kill the vice chairman…?"

Mukuro didn’t so much as glance back at her while she sheathed her knife. “It was compromised; we didn’t reach a conclusion.”
Chiaki glanced down at her unconscious boss as she was made to walk.

What followed was Chiaki being lead to the stairway. After arriving, they began ascending to the top floor. The gamer, meanwhile, wished anybody would interfere, but they hadn’t encountered any real obstacles since Kyosuke was incapacitated. If it hadn’t sunk in yet, it was starting to now: Mukuro was going to successfully take her. Making it more painful, Chiaki was helpless.

*What can I do? Currently.* Mukuro was a few paces in front of her, and her right arm was being held by the Despair. The only counterattack she could think of was the remaining syringe containing the performance enhancer. Mukuro had instilled so much fear in her, she wasn't confident a stat boost would work. The soldier would always have more experience, finesse, and skill.

*I have to try at least. She already said she doesn't want me dead; maybe she’ll take me too lightly.* Taking a deep breath, she thought about how to free herself. Now that only one Despair held her, it'd be easier. She'd have to be crafty, so she thought of the craftiest person she knew. *How would Ms. Yukizome handle this?*

"Argh!" squealed Chiaki, grasping at her heart. It was enough to make Mukuro and the despair freeze. Falling to her knees, the gamer tried her best to fake an injury. "My heart… I think it's gonna explode…" At that moment she felt the Despair's grip loosen.

*Now!* Using all her reserves, she ripped her arm free and jumped back. Knowing every second was crucial, she reached into her shoe and pulled out the syringe. She was inches away from injecting it into her arm.

However, like magic, the syringe exploded in her hand—the contents spilling on the floor. The gamer fell back because of how bad it startled her. "W-what just—"

“The performance enhancer,” said Mukuro, aiming her gun where Chiaki just was. “I had forgotten about it.”

Gears began turning as Chiaki pieced together what happened. Somehow, Mukuro was able to shoot the syringe, destroying it. It sounded so absurd to believe someone could hit such a small, moving object from several meters away with extreme urgency—but that's what had occurred.

*Is…she human?* If this was a fighting game, Mukuro would be the character people would
campaign to get banned in tournaments. There was such a gap in prowess, it seemed supernatural. If Junko could mentally defeat anyone, then Mukuro could physically do the same. A truly unstoppable duo. *What happened to these two sisters to make them like this…?*

Her thoughts stopped when Mukuro walked to her. She forced the gamer to her feet. “I can take the rest,” she said to the Despair,

With that, they continued to ascend by themselves. All the while, Chiaki hung her head over the fact she had no more moves to play. Wherever Mukuro was about to take her, she was going.

* * *

His breaths ragged, Ryouta was running with everything he had. Since it was the closest, he scrambled to R&D to assist. Though, he didn't know *how* he’d assist. The animator was already gassed, was pretty fragile, and had no weapon. However, any thought of fleeing made him feel helpless—just as he did that rainy day he ran while his class was in trouble.

*I have to do what I can. Naegi wouldn’t run in this situation…he’d hold on to hope.* He narrowed his eyes while his hand reached into his pocket, holding on to his special phone. He, in fact, did have *something* he could use as a weapon. *It’s not complete…but if I have to—*

Right as Ryouta turned the corner, his eyes widened. He put a hand over his mouth; a frightful sight lied before him. Many bodies were lying in the hallway; however, none of them seemed to be dead. In the center of the madness, he saw a familiar figure.

“Kimura…?” His heart pounded fiercely once she gazed at him. The primal look the pharmacist had made Ryouta believe he was about to be attacked. His fight-or-flight response nearly made him turn and dash. But, after a moment, her eyes softened and returned to their usual gentleness.

“Mitarai, you’re safe.”

“Y-yeah…” He noticed how much longer and unkempt Seiko's hair was. What she had done before he got here, he didn't know. Still—he didn't have a clue how—Seiko seemed to have subdued all the Despairs by herself.

“How’s the rest of the branch?”
“Well, uh, I don’t really know. Things were really hectic, and I rushed here to see if I could be of some help…”

“I've taken care of things in this department." Seiko looked downward. "Something must've gone wrong with Black Rider."

“You could say that,” uttered a voice both Ryouta and Seiko recognized. Behind them, leaning against the wall, was Chisa. Despite the wound on her side, she had a wry smile. “I’d tell you about it…but I think I need assistance first.”

“Yukizome!” yelled Seiko, rushing to the housekeeper's side to give medical aid.

Ryouta gulped, feeling terrified for her former teacher's well-being. Why is this happening…? Even after Junko Enoshima's death…there’s still so much despair…

* * *

Chiaki narrowed her eyes after stepping outside. She and Mukuro had finally reached the rooftop, a murky sky over them. Just as the gamer had guessed, there was a helicopter waiting—a helicopter that had already been started.

Waiting for them was a Despair, clearing up any doubt this was for Mukuro. Chiaki was put on the passenger's side before being handcuffed to the seat. Mukuro sat in the driver's seat. It seemed in addition to her bike, she learned to pilot a helicopter too. Whoever the Despair was, there only purpose must've been to wait for Mukuro because they weren't coming along.

After the doors were closed, Mukuro made the helicopter elevate; Chiaki sat still, powerless to stop her. The gamer's eyes were sorrowful as she looked down at her branch. Even as it got farther and farther away, she hoped anyone or anything would come to help.

Of course, nothing like that happened. Chisa, Kyosuke, all her subordinates… Nobody was able to stop the soldier from walking out with her. The woman who could've been Mukuro Ikusaba flew her away to whatever lied ahead.
Hours after the assault began, it subsided. All the Despair who managed to infiltrate the branch had been dealt with, and the outside forces had retreated. Anyone who knew the whole situation was aware of why this happened: to take Chiaki—a fact Chisa was annoyed by.

*I screwed this up,* she thought, frowning while her wound was being tended to by Seiko in the infirmary. Her wound wasn't bad enough to put her life in peril. The housekeeper honestly wasn’t sure if Mukuro was going to kill her back then. Even with her almost dying, her mind was focused on her chosen savior being taken.

Chisa smiled once she saw Kyosuke enter—or it’s better to say he barged—into the room. He was clearly angry; it internally amused Chisa. His suit was disheveled and he had a cut on his arm, indicating he had been in an intense struggle. Despite her annoyance and the current predicament, she couldn’t help but find amusement in his frustration.

“Kimura,” said Kyosuke, his eyes locked on Chisa, “leave us.”

She looked hesitant. “But, Munakata…she really should get some—”

“Now.”

Seeing his rigid gaze along with hearing the bluntness in his tone was enough for Seiko to get the message. “Please don’t take too long, Vice Chairman.” The pharmacist left the two alone.

"So, Kyosuke," said Chisa, smiling, "you don't look too happy."  

“Do you find this all funny?”

"No, the opposite." Chisa looked at the floor. "This is a complete disaster… Do you know about Black Rider?"

“If you mean Mukuro Ikusaba, then yes. As my appearance would suggest, I fought her. One of those damn Despairs interfered, and she managed to slip through my fingers with Nanami being
“Why did she leave you alive?”

“Who knows?” Kyosuke paced back and forth a few times. Then he aggressively shoved his bloodstained katana through the floor.

*Hehe, this must sting his pride.* Chisa knew how much of a perfectionist he was. If his loss had come to a random person, he’d be in a sour mood. Losing to the sister of the woman who evaded and deterred him… The housekeeper had no doubt he was seething in rage. She had to pinch herself to keep from grinning. *Come on, Chisa: you need to look sad.*

Turning to her, Kyosuke said, “What the hell were you thinking? Agreeing to Ikusaba’s demands like you did was completely out of line.” He narrowed his eyes. “Explain yourself, Yukizome.”

*Showtime.* "I…I just thought I could redeem myself…” Chisa buried her face in her palms, summoning fake tears. "In the end, I was just as useless as I was at Hope's Peak Academy. Plus, Chiaki has been taken from under my nose once again, even after I promised I'd protect her… I don't think I can take this pain much longer…"

She couldn’t see Kyosuke's expression, but Chisa knew her rouse was working. He was silent before approaching her. Knowing the time was right, the housekeeper rose and hugged him. Now out of sight, she let her grin escape. *Too easy.*

“D-do you want m-my resignation…?” she asked.

“… I’m not going to fire you. We’ll discuss it later; we need to investigate and find out Nanami and Ikusaba’s location.”

Chisa wiped the tears from her eyes. “Will you need Kirigiri, then?”

“No, she is still undergoing her penalty. As a matter of fact, I'm going to order everyone who saw Ikusaba's face to sign mandatory gag orders to never speak of it. If the media heard about this, it'd be pandemonium. I'll report to the rest of the division leaders immediately."
"Yes, that sounds reasonable." Chisa looked into his eyes. "… Do you think she was real, Kyosuke?"

He looked away. “After crossing blades with her, I find it hard to deny it. If she is the real Mukuro Ikusaba, then the mutual killing game might not have been what we thought it was.”

“For what it’s worth, Ikusaba said Enoshima wasn’t the real mastermind.”

“I doubt that. If we’re to assume that was Ikusaba…it’s not out of bounds to speculate about Junko Enoshima possibly being alive. It’d certainly explain Makoto Naegi’s fluke victory.”

*Oh, Kyosuke, it’s not that you speculate her survival…you’re hoping for it. Even if Enoshima was out ruining lives and causing mayhem, you’d enjoy it because the chance to usurp Naegi’s Ultimate Hope would be in front of you.*

“I’ll send out search parties for Nanami. They left by air, so we’ll keep a lookout in the skies.” Kyosuke scratched his chin. “Why would Nanami be such a high priority target…?”

"Maybe this was meant to instill despair in us? She is our savior after all." Chisa almost giggled at his fleeting look of annoyance when the word "savior" was said.

"Given the lengths they went to, I doubt it’s that simple. As always, Yukizome, your former student seems to be a magnet for these strange events.”

"If anything, I think it proves how pivotal she is to us. Maybe the Despairs wanted revenge after the arrest of Kitta Takara and the fall of the Despara Carnival. Perhaps, this was just retaliation.”

Kyosuke had a far-off look. "Either way, finding her is going to be difficult. We'll have to count on Nanami finding some way to contact us or escape. You better hope that high praise you gave her turns out to bear fruit; nothing less will be enough to get past Mukuro Ikusaba."

Chisa pretended to look devastated. “I understand. What would you like me to do now?”

"You stay here and recover. I'll inform Chairman Tengan first about this ordeal."
“Okay. Thank you, Kyosuke.”

Once he was gone, Chisa grinned again. *I already know where Chiaki is.* Chisa pulled out her phone. *You made a strong move, but this game isn’t over yet. Time for my counterattack. Let’s see if the mighty Mukuro Ikusaba can overcome this,* hehe.

***

Chiaki looked around her; she was in a hallway. It was the same hallway of the death maze that haunted her mind every day. Just as she had done back then, she looked for any kind of exit out of the death maze. Upon turning a corner, she saw a bright light.

“Is that…?” Chiaki could never mistake the sight she saw. It was her entire class; they were all smiling and reaching out to her.

“Come on, Chiaki!” yelled Chisa, her smile gentle and sincere. “We want you with us!”

“Everyone!” Chiaki ran to them with all her strength. The gamer felt as if she was too slow, they’d leave her behind. And they’d never return.

“Can’t you run faster than that!” asked Hiyoko. “We can’t wait forever, you know?”

“Please don't leave me!”

“I do not think she’ll reach us,” said Sonia.

“I’m almost there!”

“Yeah…it looks too late…” murmured Mikan.

“I'm here!” Chiaki reached out, wanting to get to her class more than anything. The moment she
tried to touch them, the scene ripped in half like it was paper. Once she landed, the gamer found herself in a dark room that filled her with dread. Just like the hallway, she recognized this room all too well. It was the place where she "died" that fateful day.

“A shame.” A figure was standing over her. Her long black hair was draped over her cold eyes, and her feral gaze was almost as intimidating as the knife in her hand. Chiaki, paralyzed, couldn't move as the figure stabbed the knife in her direction. "You were too slow again!"

* * *

Gasping, the gamer’s eyes popped open. She could feel her heart beating quickly. It was a dream… It was just another bad dream…

After a short flight, Mukuro landed the helicopter on a forest clearing. Apparently, it was short on gas for some reason. Once they landed, Mukuro handcuffed the gamer to herself. With the sun going down, the soldier decided it was best to camp in the woods tonight.

This is a mess… Chiaki thought, watching the flames of the fire Mukuro started dance back and forth. Chiaki peered at Mukuro; her eyes were closed and she was sitting up. Whether she was actually asleep or not, the gamer didn’t know.

With a million things in her mind, Chiaki hugged her knees while the crackling of the flames and chirping insects were audible. Just twenty-four hours ago, she was doing her job as usual. Now she had been taken hostage by possibly the real Mukuro Ikusaba and was being forced to have a camp out with her in a forest.

How can I get out of this? The gamer could, in fact, activate VEIL if she wanted. Even so, the thought of attacking Mukuro didn’t cross her mind. Based on what she had seen, a huge part of her believed the soldier could kill her while sleeping. The only other device she had was her Game Girl. Maybe I could get her so addicted, she’d starve herself…

Chiaki jumped when she heard a roaring sound. It didn't take her long to figure out the culprit was her stomach. The last meal she had was a light breakfast. That, combined with all the activity today, contributed to her famished feeling.

She gazed at Mukuro. Guess it couldn’t hurt. The handcuffs had a long chain, allowing Chiaki to tug at it. She tried a few times to get Mukuro's attention. It wasn’t until the third time she yanked it that the gamer realized what she was doing might be the equivalent of poking a sleeping bear.
Slowly opening her eyes, Mukuro said, “Yes?”

Chiaki looked down. “I’m hungry…”

Mukuro raised an eyebrow, clearly not expecting that line. The gamer thought the soldier would ignore her, but she reached into her riding jacket. She then tossed something into Chiaki’s lap. Picking it up, the gamer wondered what it was.

“It’s beef jerky,” said Mukuro, eyes focused on the fire.

“Oh…” Chiaki hastily unwrapped it and took a bite of the smoked beef. She shoved it in her mouth and took a few chews before swallowing. It wasn’t much, but it gave a nice reprieve to her hunger. “Thanks for the meal.”

Mukuro remained silent and continued to stare at the fire; her long black hair was partially hiding her eyes.

“Do you really like jerky?”

“It’s useful when you’re on the move.”

“Right, you probably traveled in lots of hard places. It must’ve been tough.”

"Not really."

... Man…this feels weird. If she was real, then the woman sitting across from her helped ruin her life. Even if her being the true mastermind was a lie, it didn’t change what she had done to help Junko bring about the Tragedy. There was a part of Chiaki who wanted to throw all her frustration at Mukuro that had been festering for over a year.

But, there was another part of her saying something else.
If this was truly her, then the origin of the Despair Sisters could be told. She hated what she and Junko were, but couldn't deny wanting to know about their past. Handling this situation with craftiness wasn't going to work; Mukuro was too good. So, Chiaki thought about another approach. *How would Miaya do it? For now, I'll treat her like one of my classmates.*

"Ikusa—I mean…Mukuro?" Chiaki saw the soldier's eyes widen; she was likely caught off guard by the gamer's formal tone. Honestly, Chiaki herself had to wrestle that out of her mouth. "Can you…tell me about your past?"

Looking even more surprised, Mukuro asked, "… Why would you want to know such a thing? If you're trying to get me to let you go—"

"No, I want to know what your life was like, and why you chose the path you did. If there are things you want to keep secret, fine."

"I'm the sister of Junko who corrupted your teacher and helped drown your world in despair…and you want to know about me?"

“… Yes, I do.”

Mukuro averted her eyes, looking as if she was considering it. Now that her expression was softer, a lot of the intimidation went away. The gamer remembered seeing Junko's childhood picture and how alike they looked. Chiaki could barely wrap her mind around someone having such a small body, yet being so lethal.

“What if I'm a fake?” asked Mukuro, still looking away. “… What confidence do you have that I won’t just deceive you and make things up?"

“If you're lying, then what will it matter? You’ve already caught me.”

Mukuro glanced at her before returning her eyes to the fire. Her blue eyes reflected the flames like crystal water. She wiped a hand across her freckled face. “The past…”

* * *
A young girl stood on a sidewalk, tears flowing down her face nonstop. Her jet-black hair swung in the scorching air, the smell of smoke in the atmosphere. Her heart stung as she witnessed the scene in front of her.

Her house was burning…with her parents still inside.

“Sis…” said the young girl’s sister who was there with her. She pulled her long red hair back, revealing her scarlet eyes that had no emotion in them. “I think our parents are dead…”
Mukuro was running with the sound of gunfire behind her.

Her adrenaline was flowing furiously. Her eyes darting for any kind of cover, she found a barricade and dove behind it. She firmly held on to her M4A1 assault rifle and listened for any approaching steps. Her enemy seemed to have halted his advance. *He’s really good… I won’t be able to beat him like I did the others.*

Currently, the nine-year-old girl was in a massive indoor facility; the arena she was in was filled with many barricades, foxholes, and trenches—just like a real battlefield. There was only one way she could leave…and that was to fulfill the conditions of what her current task was.

She had one mission: be the last one standing.

The reason being, she was in a survival game against over twenty other opponents. Making her task more difficult was the fact all her opponents were trained in this kind of competition. She was the youngest competitor by far. However, that didn’t deter her at all. Throughout this survival game, the young girl had been the fiercest opponent.

In truth, Mukuro herself couldn't believe she was performing this well. Before the game, she only expected to take out one or two people if she was lucky. She had eliminated fifteen. Whenever someone met her cold-lavender eyes, they were done. The running, the shooting, the coordination: it all felt so natural.

Now there was only one foe left, and he was the strongest.

*I have my assault rifle and handgun. He outclasses me in just about every way; to be victorious, I have to be quick.* Mukuro decided whether to peer over the barricade or blind-fire. After a moment, she decided to take a peek. The moment she stuck her head out, bullets came firing at her once again.

*He's not going to bother taking cover because he knows I'll get destroyed in a straight on firefight. I need a plan...* After wracking her brain, something came to her. Acting quickly, she took off her protective vest. She through it in the air; not a second later, her opponent fired at it. *It’s do or die!*
Grabbing her M4A1, she ran from behind the barricade and fired at the man. Despite her distraction, he was able to react and evaded her initial assault. Though, he wasn’t able to return fire. Seeing this, Mukuro let her instincts take over.

*Time to switch to the sidearm!* Mukuro took her assault rifle and threw it at her opponent. This allowed her to quickly pull out a handgun before sliding on the ground. In that split second, she had a clear shot. She was still in motion, and she was aware that if this resulted in a miss—it was game over.

Steeling her nerves, she pulled the trigger. Her bullet left the chamber, on its way to her target. Her opponent had already regained his composure and aimed at her with his rifle. If someone would’ve asked Mukuro at that moment, she would’ve told them her shot was going to hit its mark without a doubt.

As she predicted, it hit him right between the eyes.

The moment her shot hit, the man stopped what he was doing. Then he took off his goggles, revealing his brown eyes. "Shit!" he yelled with an angry expression.

Breathing heavily, Mukuro lied on the ground; her body felt exhausted. "I really did it…?"

“I can’t believe you got me…” He wiped the sweat from his face. He was a young man of about twenty years of age, and his brunette hair was sticking to his face. “What kind of little girl is that good with guns?”

“And there you have it folks!” yelled the announcer over the intercom. “In a stunning upset, the top professional himself Hideki Yoshi has been defeated byyyyy…. Mukuro Ikusaba! After an amazing sixteen kills, she is the youngest ever to win the airsoft survival game!”

The lights turned on over the stands to reveal a stunned audience. There wasn't a chorus of applause or cheering, just confused faces. Hideki had a ton of adoring fans who fully expected him to win this tournament, yet they witnessed him get bested by a nine-year-old nobody from a poor background.

Picking herself up, Mukuro smiled and reached out to Hideki to shake his hand. “That was fun. I’m actually a fan of—”
“Save it.” He flicked his hair before turning his back on her. “It’s gonna take me forever to recover from this embarrassment…”

The man walked away, not meeting her eyes at all. Mukuro hung her head, feeling an all too familiar feeling. While she did have fun participating in this survival game, she had wished her efforts could've earned her a smile from him.

“Ugh, that took long enough,” said a voice Mukuro could recognize in her sleep. She turned her head to meet the scarlet eyes of her sister, Junko. "Any longer and it would've become real survival to keep sitting through that.”

“I couldn't get him to smile... He was disgusted with me.”

Junko rolled her eyes. "Duh, I told you what would happen when you signed up for this dumb thing. You were going to breeze through the game, have one final showdown against him, and he'd act like a jerkwad when you beat him.”

Mukuro looked at the ceiling, recalling that her sister did predict the results. She had seen her do it so many times before, but it always amazed her.

“I mean, come on, a survival game where no one actually dies; where’s the excitement in that? It's like watching a horror flick where no one gets murdered.”

Mukuro looked down. “Yeah...you’re right.”

“Did you think he'd be so enraptured he'd fall in love and wait until you were old enough to marry? Three words: never, gonna, and happen.”

“Sorry… This was just a waste of time.” Tears were beginning to well up in her eyes.

Junko was silent for a moment before flicking her red hair. “Well... I guess this wasn’t a complete waste. I did get a kick out of seeing those smug competitors get their butts kicked by my gun otaku sister. And there are worse ways to spend the weekend I suppose.”
Mukuro looked and smiled. “Thanks. If it wasn’t for you paying for my admission, I wouldn't have been able to participate.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Junko went to pick up Mukuro's vest before draping it over her sister's shoulders. “Since I'm such a good sister, I'll just keep letting you see my beautiful smile.”

Mukuro blushed when she saw Junko's smile. Her sister would always refer to her looks as plain, but Mukuro thought it was the most beautiful smile in the world. It was a look she'd do anything to preserve. Her sister was the only one who genuinely smiled at her like that, and if Junko was right about that never changing—which she always was right—Mukuro was going to treasure it.

“Now let’s go home already. Our lovely and responsible parents are making us walk home, and it’ll be dark soon.”

Sighing, Mukuro should've been used to their parents' neglectfulness. Both of them weren't busy but didn't even bother to come see her compete today. Their dad simply dropped her and Junko off before driving away.

“You ready?” asked Junko. “It’ll be a pain if we gotta come back.”

“Yeah, let’s go.” Mukuro took one last look at the audience before departing the facility with her sister, their long walk home to their bad neighborhood awaiting them.

VVV

A few weeks after the airsoft tournament, Mukuro was walking home from school by herself. Even though it was a sunny day, she could feel the chill of fall. She put her hands to her mouth before breathing warm air into them.

Normally, Junko would walk with her after school while going on about how lame school was. However, her sister had begun spending more time with Yasuke Matsuda. Mukuro was a bit jealous, but happy her sister was happy.

Upon arriving on her driveway, Mukuro approached the door of her shaggy house. The unevenness and holes of the wooden structure could be seen from the outside, as was the norm of the little town she lived in.
Once she walked in, Mukuro yelled, “I’m home!” The only reason she said it was because of habit. Despite her yelling and hearing the television on, there was no answer—just like always. Sighing, she walked upstairs to her and Junko’s room.

The moment she arrived in her room, she got out some paper and began working on her article. Ever since the airsoft competition, she had begun writing for a military magazine that commissioned her. Since she loved studying weaponry and the military, it was a no-brainer for her to accept the offer. She only got small change as pay, but she'd do it for free if she had to.

“Greetings, dear sister,” sarcastically said Junko, not looking at Mukuro as she walked into the room and plopped face first on their twin-sized bed.

Mukuro smiled. “You’re early; did something happen?”

“Matsuda’s mother was having a rough time, so he decided to call it a day.”

Once Junko rolled over, Mukuro saw her devoid eyes look at the ceiling. For as long as she could remember, she always saw Junko look that way. When she wasn't talking or smiling, she'd look off into the distance with empty eyes. It was if she left her body. Mukuro always wanted to ask what she thought about but decided not since Junko would say it’d be over her head.

Looking at the floor, Mukuro asked, “So…did you ever find out who destroyed your castle?”

There was an extended silence after Mukuro mentioned the infamous event of last week. After her sister diligently worked on a marvelous sand castle—an event many people were in awe of—someone destroyed it. Mukuro and Yasuke searched forever for the culprit but never found anything.

“… Nope. I don’t even care about that anymore.” Junko sat up before looking over at the papers on Mukuro’s desk. “Are you still writing for that nerdy gun otaku junk?”

“It's a military magazine. They even give me free magazines that have all sorts of cool things about guns and different branches of the—"
“Please,” said Junko, waving her hands, "spare me the details. And you wonder why nobody talks to you in school. When are you gonna realize that being obsessed with weapons and people shooting each other isn't the most attractive trait a girl can have?"

Mukuro frowned while looking down at her article. “I’m sure somebody will—”

"Nope, never. You know how I'm always right."

It was true the freckled girl was basically a part of the background in school. Even without her uncommon hobby, she was antisocial and terrible at conversation. She always admired how Junko could go to acting bored to being animated and cheery. While trying to make her personality seem bubblier may be the solution, she still couldn’t deny her love for the military.

“Even so, I don't think I'll stop. It's the first time I've really been interested in something. Playing in that airsoft competition was the most fun I've ever had… It feels like this is all natural to me.”

Narrowing her eyes, Junko plopped back down and looked up. “Your content with being a lonely, unattractive, military nut all your life. Well, at least one of us can be happy we’ve found a purpose.”

*One of us?* Mukuro was confused, never hearing Junko say anything like that. "You're the most talented person I know; you could do anything you want."

“It’s not a question of what I *can* do…it’s what I *want* to do.”

“… I don’t understand.”

“Ugh, as usual, I have to spell it out to you. What would happen, how it would happen, and when it would happen… Tell me Mukuro, how do you think life would be if you could see everything coming?”

“Well, wouldn’t it be easy?"

"Correction: it'd be boring. It'd be like having a bunch of presents and knowing what is in them,
like going on an adventure and knowing what lied at the end of each path, like a life with no variables or curveballs… A meaningless existence.”

“But you could do anything and be anyone you feel like. You could have a successful life and live in a fancy house or be a celebrity.”

"What's exciting about that? I could go to a fancy university and have a promising career, or maybe I could go overseas and pursue a life a fame. Maybe I could even find some chump I'm head over heels for and start a family. So many possibilities in my head…and all of them suck. I can see so many things, except for what will make me happy…"

Mukuro tilted her head, trying to think of words to console her sister. Though, she didn't know what to say. The empty look in her scarlet eyes suddenly made more sense. *I want to say something, but if she can't find the answer…what hope do I have?*

Junko twirled a lock of her red hair. "I can practically hear the smoke coming out of your ears. Don't bother thinking of an answer because there is none. Honestly…sometimes I go to sleep thinking if it’s even worth opening my eyes."

“I’ll make you happy!” yelled Mukuro with worried eyes.

Junko raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t I just say—”

"I'm sure that if you keep looking…you'll find something. You just have to look in an area you haven't really thought of. And no matter what it is, I'll make sure to help so you can always be happy because…” Mukuro blushed as she looked away. "I really…love you, Junko."

Mukuro glanced at Junko to see her nonchalant look. Like always, it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. Mukuro was sure Junko would say how dumb that sounded. But, for a moment, she saw Junko’s expression soften.

Rising, Junko reached under the bed and pulled out Mukuro's airsoft handgun. Then she walked to Mukuro before putting her in a headlock. The freckled girl blushed as Junko held her firmly.

“Gosh,” said Junko, smiling, “having my unsightly, gun otaku sister being the one to assure my happiness? Now I know I'm at rock bottom.” Letting her go, Junko tossed the gun at her—which
she caught. Junko proceeded to lie back down. “Still… I’m counting on you.”

Grinning, Mukuro said, “It’s a promise.”

"Now let’s end it here before this gets too sappy." Junko smacked her own arm, crushing a bug that crawled on her. Their house had lots of pest crawling about. "And, truly, I hate this house."

While Junko turned away, Mukuro held her gun. *I promise I’ll make you happy, Junko. No matter what, I’ll do it… even if it costs me my life.*

Pointing her gun at the ceiling, Mukuro said, “Bang,” pretending she was on a real battlefield protecting her sister.

The hours passed as Mukuro wrote her article and Junko lied on the bed while moaning about how loathsome something was. Basically, just an average day for them.

And just like an average day, dinner was silent. The family of four sat at the table and quietly nibbled on their meal. On occasion, Mukuro would try to initiate conversation with her parents. The most she’d ever get was a one-word answer from her mom or dad and that was it. Junko never looked up from her meal and was always the first to finish.

Their mother was a housewife. Presumably, she was working on a career but had to put it on hold to take care of Mukuro and Junko since somebody had to stay with them. Mukuro wasn’t sure what her mother was pursuing because she never asked, but it was clear she wasn’t happy often.

Their father worked a low-end job at a convenience store. Mukuro would barely ever see him since he worked lots of shifts and would usually come home late. But, and she was sure of this since Junko told her, it was likely he would use extra shifts as an excuse to go drinking.

*Maybe it’ll work today.* Mukuro tried to think of anything interesting to talk about. A task she was having great trouble with. Aside from the military, the freckled girl didn't have much of anything to talk about. After deciding, she said, "Today in school, we learned how—"

“Done,” said Junko, rising from her seat and walking upstairs.
Mukuro looked at her plate, deciding to keep the story to herself.

Shifting into the late-night hours, the two sisters were trying to get to sleep for school tomorrow. After Junko made her usual demands to Mukuro about lying a specific amount of feet from her, she fell asleep. She claimed it was because Mukuro smelled and that she’d wet the bed; though, Mukuro took showers daily and hadn’t wet the bed in years.

Her sister fell asleep easily; however, Mukuro wasn’t able to drift off. She couldn’t hear the exact words, but her parents arguing was audible. It happened often, but it still unsettled her. The walls were thin, so she could hear it every time. And whenever she did, she’d have trouble going to sleep.

She was hesitant because it’d make her grumpy, but she patted Junko on the back. “Hey, Junko? You awake?”

“… Hard to sleep when someone is shaking me.”

“How can you always sleep when they argue like that?”

“I’m so bored all the time it’s more of a struggle to stay awake.”

“Still…families aren’t supposed to be like this…”

“Get your head out of the clouds; this is exactly how it’s supposed to be. Two people that had other aspirations had kids thinking it would strengthen their bond. They only had their happiness in mind, not ours. And now we have to be stuck in this craphole while they bicker every night. Talk about the luck of the draw.”

Mukuro grimaced a little, her sister never being one to minx words. “Couldn’t we do something? I’m sure you could come up with a plan.”

“What, you want to pretend to be a happy family? No thank you. It’d just be window dressing—disgusting, unsightly, cheap window dressing. Believe me: you’d be better off bearing it until we can leave home.”
“You’d never come back?”

“Why would I… I hate both of them.”

“Why…?”

“… They brought me into this dumb world.”

Mukuro gasped, in shock over hearing that. While Junko did often echo her disdain for the world, she had never said anything about regretting her birth. Confused, she said, “What…what do you…”

“Go to sleep, eyesore.”

Mukuro knew the conversation was over after hearing that tone. Her sister's statements, as well as the arguing in the background, continued to bother her. She could enjoy the sound of gunfire on the battlefield in movies, but this was something she wished would disappear. Unable to block it out, she murmured, "Junko…"

“Geez.” After a heavy sigh, Junko turned her body towards Mukuro and held out her arms. “You’re lucky I have a high tolerance.”

Blushing, Mukuro moved closer to her sister. Upon feeling Junko's long, scarlet hair tickle her face, she instantly felt more at ease.

“You better not wet the bed,” said Junko.

“I won’t—promise.”

This was Junko to Mukuro. While she could be blunt, when it came down to it—she was always there for her through the hard times. In her own way, Mukuro was sure her sister was trying to find some meaning. Mukuro had found solace in the military, but she truly wanted to help her sister find a purpose.
Until that day came, Mukuro enjoyed these tender moments they'd share. Even with the arguing in the background, it was worth it for this bonding. To Mukuro, Junko was like a beautiful angel—the most beautiful angel—who had yet to find her wings. Mukuro knew when she did, Junko could be a force that'd change the world forever.

However, she didn’t know that her sister would want to do just that…and in a way she never imagined.

VVV

The days passed by for Mukuro, her routine never changing. She'd go to school, come home, and write her articles for the military magazine. In a flash, her elementary school days were passing her. The issues with her family stayed the same, and she never managed to get any new friends.

However, there were changes in regard to Junko. Mukuro didn't know when it started but her sister had become more distant. She was coming home later, was passing up hanging out with Yasuke, and would instantly go to her own space upon coming home.

When this happened, Mukuro noticed some…odd observations.

She'd often catch her sister mumbling to herself, smiling at nothing for a reason unknown, and the strangest was the journal she had. She'd never let Mukuro see it, but when she stole a peek once—she saw crude drawings of abstract objects. As far as Mukuro knew, Junko always thought art was "for hermits and introverts" while expressing disinterest.

Also, the look in her eyes was different. No longer did they look empty, as if they were looking at nothing. Now they looked alive and full of intent. It was like Junko always had her mind moving at a hundred miles per hour. When Mukuro would ask what was on her mind, Junko would say not to bother her.

Currently, it was a cloudy afternoon while Mukuro was reading a magazine about Japan’s military. Just like every weekend, she spent it inside reading books about weapons or the armed forces. At this point, she probably knew more than many adult gun enthusiasts. Though, she could barely focus since her mind was on Junko.

I didn’t even see her this morning. Once she woke up, her sister was already gone. It worried her,
but she shrugged it off as Junko finding something she was interested in. Mukuro was confident she wasn’t in trouble since her sister was too incredible. What are you up to, Junko…?

“Mukuro!” yelled Junko, bursting into the room and jumping on the bed. She was wearing her brown school attire.

“What’s going on, Junko…” Mukuro was initially startled by the yell and then held on the bed before she fell off.

Smiling widely, Junko said, “Let’s go get some ice cream!”

“How…” Mukuro's heart was still beating quickly from how sudden her sister popped in. Now she was enthusiastically asking her to get ice cream—something that never happened. “But, we don’t have any money.”

“I got us covered.” Junko pulled out multiple dollar bills.

Mukuro’s eyes widened. “Where did you get that much…”?

“Not important.” Junko crawled behind Mukuro and started shoving her. "Come on, come on, come on! I already asked our folks and they said it was cool; stop stressing. Every time you overthink things, you’ll grow another freckle.”

Is that true…? Mukuro thought Junko was playing, but it did sound plausible to her. After thinking about it, Mukuro smiled. “Okay.”

"About time! Put on that ugly jacket with the hood and let’s go.”

Mukuro grabbed her favorite camouflage jacket. “I think it’s pretty…”

After putting on her attire for the cold afternoon, Junko literally yanked her out of the house. While they were walking, Mukuro was interested in Junko’s jolly behavior. She was skipping and humming some kind of tune. She never recalled her sister being this animated.
In a half hour, they arrived at the ice cream parlor. Immediately, Junko ordered both of them big sundaes. Mukuro was shocked since they never had one of those; they were really expensive and the portion was too big for a young girl.

Once they received them, they sat outside; Junko dug into their treat while Mukuro stared at it like a treacherous mountain she had to scale. “Junko,” she said, “I don’t think I can eat all this…”

“Duh, it’s called ‘eating your fill’ for a reason.”

"Not that I don't appreciate it, but why so suddenly? If mom and dad knew how much you just spent on ice cream…"

“It’s my money, so I’ll do what I want with it. Besides, I already know I’ll have a ravishing figure when I’m older and you’ll always have the body of an anorexic zombie. What’s the harm?”

Shrugging, Mukuro picked up her spoon an ate a mouthful of vanilla. She smiled upon tasting the delicious treat. Even so, the tasty sundae couldn't get a lingering question she had on her mind. “Junko, I know you said not to ask, but…why have you been so happy lately?”

Junko twirled the spoon between her fingers. “You really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“You really, really want to know?”

“Um…yes?” Admittedly, the way Junko danced around giving an answer was making her anxious.

Junko looked off into the busy street. “Mukuro, in your own words…what do you think of despair?”

Mukuro felt a sudden strong gust of wind that carried the stench of oncoming rain. Tilting her head, she said, "Despair... What do you mean?"
“You know—the opposite of hope. What do you think it is exactly?”

"It's…." Not having a clue how to answer, Mukuro looked off into the distance. It was such a vague question. Honestly, she still wasn't sure what Junko meant. "Despair is what people feel when bad stuff happens to them, right?"

“Heh, that's the simple-minded answer I expected. To know the answer to that question, you need to ask yourself another question: what exactly is hope?”

“Well, it's what people feel when good things happen to them.”

“Once again, as I expected. It's not your fault; that's exactly what society has brainwashed us into thinking.”

Still not catching on, Mukuro asked, “What do you think hope is?”

Junko’s grinned a little while she met her sister’s eyes. “Hope is harmony and order. It’s a human with a just heart moving towards what they think is their goal towards the right thing. In other words: it’s life’s boring formula.”

“Don’t you want to be happy? I think hope is good.”

“But that’s because you’ve been raised to believe hope equals happiness. Let me ask you this: say a bomb went off on this street while it was full of people. What would happen?”

*Where is she going with all this?* Mukuro thought about her answer. “Lots of people would be hurt, angry, and sad. The person responsible would have to pay for hurting people.”

“Yep, in that situation, hope can only be achieved through the culprit’s despair. But, if hope really did equal happiness, then why do we find such joy in someone’s despair? It’s because…our hearts are naturally drawn to it. You're into war; you know it's the truth.”

Averting her eyes, Mukuro knew the cruelties of war well. She studied different armies around the world and wars throughout history. To her, even with all the brutality and death, it was beautiful. It
was like an international stage play. "…War is different; soldiers only follow orders."

“Oh come on. What’s stopping everyone you see around you from being a soldier constantly fighting for survival? I’ll tell you: rules, society, and peer pressure. Once these man-made tools to control people disappear…that’s when you see the real nature of mankind." Junko’s grin twisted even wider. "Human hearts will naturally seek out despair. Hope is nothing but smoke and mirrors."

*How long has she been thinking about these things?* Despite the explanation, Mukuro still didn’t fully understand. Lots of things her sister said could be confusing, but she had never heard her say such grandiose statements. “So, this is what you’ve been thinking about.”

“Yep—I think I’ve finally found a purpose.”

Smiling, Mukuro said, “I still don’t fully understand, but if you’ve found something that makes you happy…I’ll do my best to help you.”

“Hehe.” Junko took ate another spoonful of ice cream. “I know.”

“It’s starting to get late. Mom and Dad will be mad we spoiled our dinner…”

“Gosh, you’re such a stick-in-the-mud.” Winking, Junko put a finger over her mouth. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Mukuro nodded, trusting Junko’s intuition. After tossing their ice cream, they walked home.

As they walked, the crackling of thunder could be heard in the distance. Mukuro didn't care much since the elements never scared her. She knew in order to be a good soldier, one most face mother nature as well.

Oddly, despite how talkative she was earlier, Junko had gone silent. No longer was she skipping merrily and humming; now she was dead silent as her eyes were hidden behind her matching hair. *Is she upset?* She decided to ask her about it when they reached their house.
With their house very close by, Mukuro sniffed the air and raised an eyebrow. “Is that…smoke?” Wondering if someone was having a barbecue, she turned the corner where her house was.

In those moments…she forgot how to blink.

"Is…that…” Mukuro's legs moved on their own, darting towards the inferno.

The inferno that had enveloped her house.

She wanted to move her mouth, but couldn't. She simply stood still while the scorching wind blew her jet-black hair. Her heart was stinging when a sudden reality dawned on her...

Her parents were both inside when they left, and there was no sign of them.

“Sis…” said Junko, her eyes looking barren. “I think our parents are dead…”

“No!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. She was about to run to the house before Junko grabbed her arms. “We need to do something, Junko!”

Despite the amount of emotion Mukuro was pouring out, Junko was still stone-faced. "It's too big for us; that house was a huge fire hazard…”

“But…” Mukuro's tears were flowing down her face. "Our parents could be alive…”

“If they were, they’d be here. We haven’t even gotten a call… This fire has been burning for a while.” Junko looked down. “They’re gone, Mukuro…”

Mukuro fell to her knees. The gravity of it all was choking her. Her parents, her belongings, they're home… It was all gone now. "You can do anything, right, Junko…" For the first time she could remember, Mukuro directed an angry expression at her sister. "Why couldn't you have stopped this!"

Mukuro was so caught up in her emotions, she didn't react to the slap Junko hit her with. She's
normally aware of her surroundings like a soldier would; right now, she was in too much internal pain to care.

Turning her back on her, Junko murmured, “I’m…in despair too…”

Wiping fresh tears from her face, Mukuro looked at the burning house again. She instantly felt bad for snapping at her beloved sister. “I’m sorry; should we wait for the police?”

“No, we need to leave.”

“Wouldn’t that make us look guilty? And…I really think we should—”

“Wake up!” yelled Junko, staring at Mukuro with desperate eyes. “We'll be put in crappy foster homes, and that's only after the police get finished with us. I might get taken by a family, but you'll never be. All you are is a gun otaku with no other qualities. The only person that will ever smile and love you is right here…and they'll separate us… You'll be alone…forever.”

It played in Mukuro’s head like a horror movie. Junko was right. Even with her parents or at school, she was always alone. Living in a foster home all her life was scary enough, but being away from Junko… Mukuro never wanted to leave Junko side. “I…I don’t want to be separated from you…”

Placing her hands on Mukuro's shoulders, Junko said, “I don’t want that either. That’s why we gotta run.”

“… And go where? We don’t have anything…”

“Did you forget who I am? I can save us. But first… you have to help me. Help me find my happiness; live for me. Can you do that, Mukuro?”

Not a second passed before Mukuro said, “I was always going to do that.”

The two sisters hugged before running. Mukuro took one last look at her burning house before facing forward. Not having a destination in mind, she followed her sister—just as she always
The months that followed were hard. The two sisters left the town and walked for what felt like ages. Winter certainly didn’t make this any easier. Still, Mukuro just kept following Junko’s lead—who seemed to be indifferent.

Thanks to the money Junko had on her—which she never told Mukuro how she got—they were able to survive on light meals. Although, there would be times they both wouldn't eat for a whole day; Mukuro even had to sift through garbage on a few occasions.

Eventually, they saw an article in a newspaper about their house burning down. Just as Junko said, both their parents' bodies were found and the two sisters were declared missing. The cause of the fire was ruled an electrical shortage. Mukuro was sad when she replayed the fateful day in her head; Junko tossed the paper aside and pressed on.

It wouldn’t be a stretch to say Junko was the reason she had lived up to this point.

One day, the two were resting in an abandoned train station. Mukuro was lying by Junko while the scarlet-haired girl was sitting up. Both of them were dirty and incredibly skinny from being malnourished.

Weakly, Mukuro said, “Junko…this is getting really hard.”

"Yeah…I think I'm tired of this kind of despair too. Looks like it's time to move things along."

What does she mean? Too weak and too tired to inquire, the freckled girl’s eyes grew heavy. She saw what looked like Junko rising before she fell into a slumber.

Slowly, Mukuro opened her eyes. After wiping the sleep from them, she looked around to see it was daytime. She was in the same abandoned train station, but there was one difference: Junko was
It didn't take long for panic to set in. Did she abandon her? Was she hurt? Did someone take her while she was sleeping? Questions of this nature were whirling in her mind on repeat. She slowly rose before looking around for any sign of her sister. "Junko! Junko!"

“I’m in here, crybaby!” yelled a voice from the woman’s bathroom.

An instant sigh of relief escaped Mukuro's lungs as she recognized her sister’s voice. “Using the bathroom?”

“I’m prepping myself for the road ahead.”

“Um…”

“If this is going to work, I need to refine myself. I’m an adorable cutie as is, but I need to spice it up. The less I look like you the better, hehe.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“You’ll see.”

Before Mukuro could ask, her sister stepped out. If the freckled girl wouldn't have already heard her voice, she would've thought there was a stranger in front of her. Her sister looked completely different.

Her long, scarlet hair was replaced by strawberry blond twin-tails, and her eyes had become as blue as the ocean. She was also wearing lots of foundation and her long nails had been painted bright red. Her clothes looked more stylish, plus there was a great scent coming from her. It’s almost if her sister had jumped into someone’s body.

“Junko…what is this about?”
“This is gonna be our meal ticket, as well as my new look.” Junko placed her hands on her hip. “By the way, eyesore… as of now, my full name is Junko Enoshima.”
Watching Junko’s rise to fame was the most incredible thing Mukuro had seen—even counting the marvelous feats of valor and strength she had read about war veterans.

When Junko explained how she'd use her "irresistible charm" to get herself famous, the freckled girl didn't get it. They were penniless, homeless, and had no connections to prominent people. It wasn't so much that Mukuro didn't think she could do it—she felt her sister could accomplish anything—but she wasn’t sure how she’d pull it off.

So naturally, Junko pulled it off perfectly.

She managed to get on a small television show that was popular in Japan. It dealt with people in unfortunate situations. Throughout the show, Junko described the "tragedy" that was their lives. Junko explained how their life before their parents’ death was rough, them being homeless, and her and Mukuro being all they had for each other.

And she delivered the story with amazing charm. Junko always knew when to look sorrowful, look angry, and even sneak in some light humor. Even Mukuro herself had never seen Junko look so… natural. It was like the stage was made for her.

You’re amazing as always, Junko, Mukuro thought while she sat backstage and watched the live interview on a flat screen television. Her sister was currently explaining and answering questions the brown-haired middle-aged male host had.

“That sounds very rough,” the host said, adjusting his glasses. “What other hardships did you face being homeless?”

Junko paused, then took a deep breath before speaking. "Too many to count. We were hungry all the time, we were afraid, and it was cold. But I persevered and stayed strong for my sister."

Mukuro could see people in the audience tear up when the camera focus on them.
“It wasn’t all bad.” Junko modestly smiled. “At least we didn’t have a bedtime.”

The mood lightened in the room as the audience laughed. Even Mukuro giggled after that. More than anything, she marveled at how Junko could dictate the emotions and tone of the conversation so well. *If she keeps this up, she might actually get popular.*

As Junko instructed, Mukuro looked down at the smartphone she had. It was her job to monitor how popular the interview was on social media and get a feel for how people felt.

Like always, it was just as Junko said. Tons and tons of comments were coming in—every single one being extremely positive. They had all fallen in love with the talented blond. Mukuro could barely read all of them because more and more kept coming. *Right again, Junko.*

"When you were homeless," said the host, "why did you not go to the authorities? Since you're kids, I'm sure they would've provided you with help."

Junko averted her eyes. “I thought about doing that at first too…but…”

“Did you not trust them?”

“No…I was afraid they’d split me and my sister up. I’ve heard scary stories about siblings who get split up in foster homes…and I didn’t want that. My sister and I live for each other, and we never wanted to be separated—even if it meant living on the streets.” Junko blushed as she looked embarrassed. “I guess what I’m saying is…I love her a whole lot.”

This made Mukuro blush as well. Junko said it with such sincerity, it made Mukuro’s heart beat fast. She smiled upon seeing how touched the crowd looked at the sisters' strong bond. Even the comments online said how "cute" and "courageous" Junko was being.

“And what about your aspirations? What do you hope will come from sharing your story?”

“My aspirations…” Junko closed her eyes momentarily. “I’ve always been interested in fashion and trendsetting, so I’d love to be a fashionista!”
“Hmm, how ambitious. What kind what you like to be?”

“I don’t want to be all snobby or larger-than-life. I want to be relatable and unique. Although… I’m so plain an unimpressive… I don’t know if it’s something I could do…”

*Fashionista?* thought Mukuro. The freckled girl was positive Junko never mentioned anything about being interested in fashion, let alone wanting to be a fashionista. *That explains her makeover, but why a fashionista...?*

The rest of the interview went smoothly with Junko being consistently great throughout. When she finished, she received a standing ovation from the crowd.

After giving a bow, she departed and arrived in the back room with Mukuro. She immediately fell back on the couch and sighed with exasperation. "Gosh, this will be so annoying to keep doing."

"You were great, Junko!" Mukuro held the phone up for her to see. "Everybody online loves you and even says they’re going to donate and support you in wanting to be a fashionista."

"Of course they did. Who could resist helping this cute face?" Junko took the phone from Mukuro. "I guarantee I’ll get more offers to be on television the following day."

Gasping, Mukuro finally understood why Junko wanted to be on the show. “Oh, you wanted to expose yourself and gain popularity. Now you can keep spreading your name and getting famous.”

“Well look at that: your brain is good for things besides geeking out over military crap. The most important facet of fame is exposure. Rich businessmen will be lined up wanted to represent me.”

Mukuro furrowed her brow, not liking the idea of someone potentially taking advantage of her sister. "You're smart enough to do it on your own." Getting a bright idea, she smiled. "I could be your agent."

“Ha-ha!” Junko laughed for a good minute. “You be my agent? You’d probably advise me on style about looking like some smelly soldier. No thank you.”
She became embarrassed, not because of Junko teasing her…but because that was actually what she was thinking. “… I was not.”

"Uh-huh." Yawning, Junko rested her head on her palm. "I'll be the nation's darling while you'll be… well, you'll still be you, but no one cares about that."

“Once you get famous, we can finally get off the streets.” As much as she loved camping out, Mukuro would much prefer to have her belly full under a roof. “You were so amazing on stage. It’s like you put everyone under a spell.”

“Well, our situation was exploitable.”

Tilting her head, Mukuro asked, "How?"

Junko rolled her eyes. "We're two little girls who are helpless and homeless. Also, I'm an endearing sweetheart who people can't help but love. Literally, all I need to do is keep doing what you just saw and people will beg me to take their money."

“You look like you had fun doing it. Maybe I could try?”

“Tch, no. They'd be interested in you for like, a minute—at most. People only care about someone they're interested in, regardless of their situation. Or if everyone one else seems to." Junko smirked. "Everyone wants to be their own individual, yet always fall back into a collective. How despair-inducing."

“Why do people do that?”

“Because individuals are always contradicting themselves. Like the person who wants true love, yet goes for someone for primal or selfish desire. Or like an honor student with top marks having a hidden life full of drugs and excess. Even a tolerant and faithful saint who turns out to be intolerant and not practicing what they preach in private.”

Just like every time Junko gave her blunt critique on a facet of humanity, Mukuro just shrugged and smiled. “I don’t fully understand, but whatever you say, Junko.”
“Man, maybe your brain is only good at absorbing gun otaku stuff. It’s lonely being the bright sibling…” Wiping her skirt, Junko stood with a slight grin on her face. “Say, how would you like to take a trip overseas?”

Mukuro’s eyes lit up. She had always wanted to visit other countries—mostly to read stuff about their military, but that was beside the point. “Really! Where do you want to go?”

“When I have enough money…I was thinking about a trip to Europe.”

VVV

Junko’s popularity only grew in the coming months. Her face spread across, not only the nation but the world like wildfire. Despite the short time and her young age, she was becoming a cultural phenomenon faster than anyone had seen. And with that fame, came endorsements and various gigs—and then came lots of money.

Their lifestyle changed completely. Gone were the days of living in a ragged house and eating cheap foods. The two sisters enjoyed a life of luxury. Granted, Mukuro would mostly stand back and watch her sister be admired, but she was happy for her success.

As Junko said she would, she and Mukuro were now on their way on a vacation around Europe. If someone read the news, it’d say they were visiting some family. In reality, they were flying around the continent in Junko’s private jet and visiting many countries.

Currently, the two sisters were high in the air on Junko’s jet flying over the Middle East.

“Wow…” murmured Mukuro, looking out the window into the night sky. She had flown plenty by now, but it never failed to hypnotize her. She would prefer a fighter jet over a luxury jet, though. “It’s amazing how far we’ve come since we were homeless.”

While she was eating some lobster in her designer clothes, Junko said, “We? I think you mean I’m the amazing one. You’re just a nobody freeloader.”

Mukuro looked down in shame. “I could get a summer job…”
“Heh, I don’t know what’s funnier: thinking someone would employ you or you being good at something besides shooting toy guns.”

“Well…how can I help you be happy then?”

“No clue. No matter how hard I ponder it, I can’t think of a single way you could be useful to me.” Junko pouted. “I’m afraid it may be impossible…”

“Wait, I can…!” Not being able to think of anything, Mukuro's mouth didn't move. "I…can…” It was like hitting a brick wall. She didn't know what she should do; she didn't know what she could do. The only talent she had was with military-related things. *That's the only thing I can do, but how can that…*

“Maybe you should just sit back and stay out of the way. I have some major plans I'll be working on in the coming years…and I don't see a purpose for you…”

“I’ll protect you!” she yelled standing up, her face bright red. “I’ll defeat any enemies in your way!”

Raising an eyebrow, Junko asked, “What, are you gonna shoot someone with a water gun? You're a young girl who's got the physique of a broom. At least act like you have common sense, you eyesore.”

“I’ve read hundreds of stories about soldiers, assassins, and mercenaries with small bodies—but their technique was so impressive, nobody could beat them.”

“Technique is something you have none of when it comes to real combat.”

“I could learn.”

“From where? What army would let a useless little girl enlist? Face it, Mukuro…the current you can do nothing for me—or anyone for that matter. Until you do something about it, just keep out of my hair.”
“But…Junko…”

Not paying her any attention, Junko put some headphones over her ears and closed her eyes. The freckled girl knew she was off to sleep.

Mukuro was lost. She promised to always keep her sister smiling, and now she was obsolete. The only talent she had wasn’t good enough to help her—at least until she could refine it somehow. But Mukuro couldn’t think of how to do that.

*How can I make myself stronger…?* She thought and thought and thought…but nothing. Mukuro could think of nothing that’d get her strong enough to be useful quickly. She looked out the window, the wide desert of the Middle East beneath them.

Then…it came to her.

*In this area should be…* Mukuro recalled reading a magazine about a mercenary group of soldiers that were seen in this area. If it was true, then there could be an opportunity right below her. She had an idea one would consider crazy.

Remembering where she was told it was, Mukuro pulled out a parachute from under her seat. Next, she got a bag full of supplies and a kitchen knife from her meal. She was about to awaken Junko but decided against it. This was something she needed to do herself. The young black-haired girl walked to the jet door before putting a hand on the hatch.

Before pushing down, she froze. It dawned on her how insane this was. Her, a young girl not even in high school, was going to parachute from far in the air to a dangerous environment. She had no clue if she’d find what she was looking for.

What was certain was that a treacherous desert that would become boiling when the sun came up laid below her. And that wasn't even counting the predators. She gulped, thinking this was too extreme. *I…I can’t do this.*

Right when she was about to go back to her seat, she looked back at her sister. It was then an even greater fear pierced her heart. The fear of Junko leaving. As the fashionista said, Mukuro couldn’t do anything as she was. By the time she maybe could, Junko would’ve likely moved on.
And not being able to see Junko’s smile scared her than any danger in this desert, or the world.

Mukuro took a deep breath and steeled her nerves. With strong convictions at her back, she opened the door of the jet before plummeting into the cold night air.

She immediately felt the sensory overload as her body dove towards the earth. It was like riding a roller coaster, only there was no time to pause and anticipate the huge fall. Her adrenaline high, and there were too many intense sensations to keep up with. Her body felt like it was still on the plane and her brain had yet to catch up. Mukuro imagined this is how a superhero felt.

Now! she thought, pulling on her cord, springing forth the parachute. It was dawn, so Mukuro could see where she was relative to the ground. Luckily, the military enthusiast had read many articles about protocol when skydiving.

Even after she gently floated to the sandy ground, her senses were still going crazy. It was like being on a constant high. Once she landed, she looked up to see Junko’s jet in the distance. They’ll come looking, but I’ll be long gone by then...

Mukuro took off her parachute and looked at the rising desert sun. She had only seen scenes like this in books. Seeing it in person was incredible. Falling from the sky made her feel invincible, and the beautiful scenery only added to the incredible experience.

Looking around, Mukuro saw nothing but desert in every direction. Around her was a whole environment filled with many beauties and many challenges. The freckled girl knew all about survival tactics in difficult environments from her dutiful research, but she knew this would test her more than her time being homeless.

Even so, she had the ultimate motivation to live and find what she sought.

I’ll claw my way back to you, Junko... Mukuro looked at the sky; Junko’s jet was out of sight. When I do, I’ll become something invaluable to you. I know you hate waiting...so I’ll be quick...

Not knowing what exactly lied ahead or which direction was the correct one, Mukuro walked forward into the land of sand.

VVV
Off the top of her head, Mukuro could remember a handful of stories about soldiers who had gotten lost or separated from their squad and had to survive. She remembered reading those mesmerizing articles thinking she would like to try that kind of survival challenge someday.

The freckled girl was beginning to regret it.

Like most heroic tales, actually being in their shoes made it seem much less glorious. She had been walking under a baking sun for hours. It was like someone had put her in an oven. Her lips were so dry, they would crack if she moved them. Swallowing had become a chore now that her throat was dry.

If I don't find water soon... She regretted not picking up a few bottles of water before her dive from the jet. Mukuro chose not to because of her confidence in being able to survive on her own.

Her desperation was growing to where she’d welcome the sight of Junko’s jet. Smiling, she could already imagine Junko saying something like how “just being Mukuro was survival enough.”

Feeling her strength falter, she fell to her knees on the scorching sand. I don't even know if they're out here or not. At this rate, I won't be of any use to Junko at all...

“You are such a disappointment!” yelled Junko, appearing before her out of thin air like a ghost.

“Junko…” Mukuro could barely make out her form.

“You get all confident and decide to brave the desert, and then you give up without a day even passing. What kind of soldier are you? I thought you'd make sure I'd always be smiling…”

“I am…but I—”

Sighing, Junko shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know why I bother with you. Just a useless girl with a useless talent she can't even use right. The only benefit you're going to be to me is a nice sob story about my lost sister I'll tell my fans. Oh, and the predators who I'm sure would love you…for a meal that is." Junko turned her back and vanished.
Junko… Picking herself up, she wiped her face. *I’m hallucinating; if this keeps up…*

Squinting, Mukuro noticed something else in the distance. It looked like a few trees. If this was no mirage, then she automatically knew what that meant. *If there are trees, then there must be water!*

She ran towards the trees, wishing she could just teleport there. As she reached them, she smiled upon finding out they were indeed real. The freckled girl had found an oasis.

Mukuro cupped her hands together in the water and began drinking. Fortunately, it was clean. It didn't take long for her body to feel rejuvenated again.

Her happiness didn't last, however. She noticed something in the sand next to her. "Are these… footprints?"

Once she heard a growl from behind her, she turned to see a wolf. Five grayish wolves to be exact. And they were all eyeing her ferociously.

Quickly, Mukuro pulled out the knife she had on her and held it up. She was hoping these wolves could be trying to intimidate her into leaving, but the way they circled her crushed that. Right now, she was prey. *They’re all very skinny… Probably haven’t eaten in a while.*

One of the wolves began getting close, so Mukuro swiped the knife at him. Then another tried to do the same until she swiped again. This pattern started happening for minutes on end.

*They’re trying to tire me down…and it's working.* Mukuro could feel the fatigue setting in. Having to constantly be on her toes while the fierce heat continued was brutal. She knew it wouldn’t be long until her furry enemies sensed that and went for the kill.

Narrowing her eyes, Mukuro tightened the grip on her knife. It was risky, but she had a plan. *If I can kill one, the rest will see I'm too much of a threat and leave. Because of their hunger, though, they'll be very desperate…*

Weighing her options, Mukuro decided to try. Just as she had read about, she tried to feign weakness so one of them would lunge for her. She got on a knee and kept her senses sharp. Like
she wanted, a wolf from her flank lunged at her.

*There!* Mukuro evaded and shoved the blade in the beast’s ribs. It howled in pain as Mukuro pulled the blade out. She looked around, hoping the others chose to disengage.

Sadly, it didn’t seem to be. They weren’t backing off as they eyed her with envy. *No choice; I’ll have to take them all out!*

Another wolf lunged at her from the right, which she barely dodged. That caused Mukuro to lose her footing, making another wolf snap at her. She screamed in pain when its sharp fangs dug into her arm.

Desperate, she stabbed the wolf repeatedly to release her from the iron-clad bite. Once it did, she held her bleeding wound while wincing from the agony. Her knowledge on wounds told her it’d be bad if it wasn't wrapped soon.

*What can I do...?* She was wounded, exhausted, and outnumbered. None of the heroic stories she could recall gave her any clue of how to survive. The only thing she thought of was playing dead, but these wolves were intent on feasting on her.

Her energy almost depleted, Mukuro fell face first on the sand. She didn't have anything left. *Sorry, Junko... I couldn’t keep my promise...*

She was sure the wolves would pounce on her and finish the job. Part of her hoped she’d lose consciousness to escape the inevitable pain. The wolves closed in on her, prepared to attack.

Then four shots were heard. After that, the remaining four wolves all went down instantly.

“What do we got here?” asked a male voice. Mukuro's vision was blurry, so she could barely make out their face. “Far from home aren't we, little lady?”

She couldn’t answer before she fainted from her intense exhaustion.

VVV
“Ugh,” grunted Mukuro, sitting up while rubbing her eyes. After her initial grogginess wore off, she looked at her surroundings.

She was lying on a blanket in some small ravine, it was nighttime, and there were several men circled around a fire a few meters from her. They were laughing and conversing while taking hearty sips of what she assumed was alcohol.

_Did they save me? At first, she was hesitant, thinking these men could have far more nefarious intentions. But then she noticed they were all wearing army vests and gear. They were soldiers. Can they be…_ Her heartbeat rose as she approached them, thinking they were the people she was searching for.

As she got closer, she could see the varying features of the soldiers. There were four in total. One had a skeleton mask and some shades on, one had a bushy red beard, one had a face that looked like it had been through ten wars and wore a bandanna, and the final looked the youngest with black hair and the kind of serious eyes you’d see on a veteran soldier.

“Aye,” said the man with the red beard, “the little lady has awakened. You’re lucky you’re not wolf chow.”

“I was drinking, and they came out of nowhere…”

”Arabian wolves usually keep to themselves,” said the man with the rugged face. His voice turned out to be just as rough-sounding. ”You caught a starving pack of them.”

The young soldier took a puff of his cigar. “What is a young Japanese girl doing in a desert in the Middle East? You a tourist who got lost?” He handed Mukuro a bowl of stew that was simmering in a pot over the flames.

She wasted no time slurping the contents to fill her empty belly. The flavorful soup felt like heaven in her mouth. ”No, I wanted to come here. Actually…if you're who I think you are, I wanted to find you.”

The man with the red beard laughed heartily. “Is that so? Maybe you sought us out for fashion tips, or maybe you want help on your school—”
“Shut up, Red,” said the young man. “Why did you want to find us?”

“… Are you the mercenary group of soldiers known as Fenrir?”

There was silence among them as the soldiers exchanged looks with each other. Clearly, this situation was odd—even for battle-tested soldiers such as themselves. The rugged looking man said, "How did you know our location?"

“I've read about you all and how you frequently visit this area."

The young man narrowed his eyes, making Mukuro a bit anxious. "...You visited this desert by yourself on the small chance you'd meet Fenrir?"

“I did.”

The young man looked at his comrades again before holding his right hand up and removing the glove from it. Mukuro’s eyes widened when she saw the crest of Fenrir tattooed on his hand. “Well, you found us—or we found you to be more accurate. What is your business with us?”

Mukuro forced her nervousness down and tried to speak clearly. “I want to join you and become stronger!”

Just like before, a silence ensued, only this one was more awkward. The soldiers looked confused as if this was some practical joke. The young one looked like he wanted to say something, but was having trouble as he scratched his chin.

“Ahaa!” laughed Red. “This little lass just keeps getting funnier and funnier!”

"We don't accept applications," said the rugged one. "Even if we did, I doubt you'd have a resume good enough."

Biting her lip, Mukuro said, "Give me a chance. Just months ago, I won an airsoft survival game
against some of the best pros on the world. I've read and written hundreds of articles about the military. I believe I have a natural talent when it comes to being a soldier."

“Fake guns made for competition and real combat are two different things,” said the young one. “We kill people—many people. Why would you, a kid with their whole future ahead of them, ever want anything to do with this kind of work? If you really want to, join the military when you finish school.”

“I need to get stronger now.” Mukuro looked the young man in the eye with intense focus. "I have a promise to keep to someone important, and this is the only way I know how. If I have to destroy any obstacle or kill any enemy in her way…I'll do it without mercy. That…is my reason for living."

“You're a kid that weighs eighty-pounds soaking wet. You'd be useless in combat.”

"Try me. If I die...I die."

A stare down between the two ensued as if the young man was trying to make her back down through intimidation. However, Mukuro wasn't faltering. She had come this far and she wasn't taking "no" for an answer.

Finally, after a minute of the crackling flames being the only sound, he looked away. "Damn it…" murmured the young man, rubbing the back of his head. "I have a test for you."

The rugged man stood up. “Falcon, are you seriously going to—”

"You see that look in her eyes, don't you? I can't believe it, but she already has the conviction necessary." Falcon, took an empty can and walked a few meters before placing it down. Then he pulled out his handgun and handed it to Mukuro. "Take it and back up ten paces."

Without hesitation, Mukuro took the weapon and backed up.

“If you hit the can, I'll put you through intense training. If you miss, we're taking you to the nearest town and you're never to seek us out again.”
“This ought to be a riot,” said Red.

Mukuro held the gun with perfect form. She could tell the unfairness of this challenge in a second. It was windy, visibly was low because the only light came from the fire, and the ground was uneven. Still, the freckled girl had gone to a different world now. All that existed was the gun, herself, and that can. She steadied her grip and fired.

A clang of metal was heard as the can was blown away.

Red’s jaw dropped. "Damn…that would've been a hard shot for us..."

Falcon chuckled as he put a hand on his hip. "A deal's a deal. My code name is Falcon, the scary looking one is Ogre, the ginger who never shuts up is Red, and the silent one is Bones." Falcon held out his hand, a stern gaze in his face. “Prepare, because hell begins tomorrow. From this point on, your name is Wolf—and you answer to me.”

Smiling and bowing, Mukuro said, "I'm ready." Don’t worry, Junko, I’ll get stronger soon!
Chapter 31: Save the Star and the Stray Hound III (Last Verse)

After Mukuro convinced Falcon to train her, she was taken to one of Fenrir's secret hideouts. She had wondered why there were only four members but got her answer when she walked in. There were many soldiers there, all branded with the Fenrir tattoo. It seemed Fenrir had almost a hundred members that traveled across the globe for any job their employer had for them.

It went without saying how shocked everyone was to find out the leader of Fenrir's apprentice was an unimpressive-looking little girl. She received odd looks from the rugged looking individuals, but in truth—Mukuro was too starstruck to notice.

Mukuro saw many famous and infamous soldiers she’d read about. She would’ve asked for autographs and advice if Falcon hadn’t told her there would be no formalities. After arriving at their hideout, she was given a room, told she would start her training tomorrow morning, and that was it.

Quite the contrary to a kid's normal behavior, Mukuro was extremely excited.

And so, her strenuous training that’d last a year began.

Falcon's first priority was hardening her mind by putting her in the most extreme environments. She walked through the desert, crawled through muddy rain forests, scale treacherous mountains, and even had to stay in temperatures below zero with minimal clothing. The goal for these challenges was simple: survive.

Then there came the combat training, which was brutal on good days. Falcon never had back when they trained hand-to-hand. Mukuro was sure he'd hold back when they used batons or knives, but it was hard to tell sometimes. It wasn't uncommon for Mukuro to have multiple bruises or welts by the end.

Training with firearms was more relaxed, but that wasn't saying much. She was made to use handguns, rifles, sniper rifles, and every other type of gun a soldier needs. If Falcon thought she was lacking on aim or efficiency, she'd go without a meal and be made to practice until her finger barely had the strength to pull the trigger.
Clearly, this was grueling work not meant for the average person, let alone a child. Mukuro bet there weren't many adults who could withstand this kind of grind. There were nights where she'd be in so much pain, she couldn't sleep. She could've quit whenever she wanted, and Falcon would often remind her she could…but Mukuro never did.

The reason being, Mukuro loved it.

The sweat, the pain, the blood—she loved every bit of it. She couldn't remember a time in her life she felt so alive. It felt like she had finally found her natural habitat. Mukuro he did more than love it—she embraced and adapted with startling speed.

Soon, Mukuro could survive in any environment she was thrown in. No matter how perilous the situation, she'd come out smiling with her belly full, ready for the next challenge.

It wasn’t long until she could match Falcon in combat. If her opponent was stronger, she’d have to be quicker and smarter—which she always was. Her close combat prowess was even deadlier with a knife in her hand. It didn’t take the freckled girl long to become one of the deadliest fighters with a knife in Fenrir.

While it was debatable whether she was better with a gun or a knife, Mukuro felt she was slightly better with firearms. She could aim, fire, and reload an array of guns with extreme ease. At one point, she had a streak of over a hundred head shots on practice dummies—a streak that mesmerized her fellow Fenrir soldiers.

Soon, Mukuro's reputation had gone from being a strange kid to the soldier prodigy, as well as a lone wolf. She didn't spend much time with others; however, she could tell they were steering clear of her. Falcon would say it's because she was relatively new.

But Mukuro knew the reason: they were intimidated. Even among freaks and monsters, she was still the biggest freak show.

In a flash, a year had passed, and Mukuro completed her training. While on the training field, Falcon handed her his own army knife with the Fenrir mark branded on the sheath.

"You made it, Wolf," said Falcon, his gaze as rigid as ever. Throughout the training, their relationship had always been a strict teacher and a student. The most she'd get from him was fleeting lighthearted moments. "Officially, you are now a member of Fenrir. Once you take my
knife, it forms a life-long membership, foreseeing you follow all our rules."

With no hesitation, Mukuro took the knife. “I accept.”

Falcon took out a cigar before lighting it. "If myself from now went and told my past self he'd train a little girl and that she'd pass training…I would've called myself a crazy son of a bitch." He put the cigar in his mouth. "Yet, here we are."

“I wouldn’t have been. All along…I knew this is where I was supposed to be."

“Hmm, well now that training is over, it’s time to start repaying your debt. You start taking assignments tomorrow and we'll get the tattoo of Fenrir put on you this evening. That'll be all, Wolf."

With that, he began walking away. Mukuro balled her fists, anger rising. He still hasn’t… She knew it wasn't wise, but she asked, "You still refuse to smile at me, sensei? Even after I’ve come this far…you still look at me like a problem you can't get rid of… If you didn't want to train me, you should've just refused back then…"

His back still faced her. "… Heh, all the talent in the world, but it seems the same little girl who hungers for a pat on the back is alive and well. Of course I can't smile at you because…when I look at you, I can't help but get depressed."

"What?" Despite her suspicion, she decided to hold her tongue after seeing Falcon leave. What does that mean…?

Discarding those thoughts, she looked at the gray clouds above. Finally, she had become a soldier of Fenrir.

The way she perceived the world changed. Now when she saw a random object on a desk, she immediately thought of how it could be used as a weapon. She would take notice of how many people were in a room, what they were carrying, and her best method of resistance should something go awry. She had the mind of a perfect soldier.

Some might say she was truly born on the day her parents burned, or the day she jumped from the plane, but in her mind…this was the day the true Mukuro Ikusaba was born.
I’ll be with you soon, Junko...

VVV

Over the next few years, Mukuro did an immense array of jobs. And she did them all with one-hundred percent success. Whether it was assassination, espionage, or plain open-field gunfights, she always completed her job. The mysterious soldier called Wolf was becoming infamous among even world governments and agencies.

During her reign of domination, Mukuro earned two more nicknames. The first was more on the humorous side. Her comrades would call her “schoolgirl soldier” because she's carried out most of her jobs in a black school uniform. She'd wear a vest or goggles on occasion, but it was rare to see her in practical gear. When asked, she'd say, "It feels comfortable."

The second nickname was much more incredible. So incredible in fact, many people believed it was a myth. Some called her the Reaper because of an insane accolade she claimed was true. If it was to be believed, she had never received a single injury while on a mission or battlefield.

She was an invincible, supernatural demon veiled in black that’d bring death wherever she visited. Hence, the Reaper.

Mukuro never kept up with current events in pop culture, but she'd check on how Junko was faring in the public eye. From what she read, her sister was as popular as ever. Of course, she expected as much. She could’ve tried visiting, but Mukuro knew her sister well enough to know if Junko needed her—she’d get her attention.

Currently, a sixteen-year-old Mukuro was standing atop a mountain in snowy weather. With binoculars, she was observing a compound below. According to her client, there was someone being held hostage in the facility. Mukuro's job was to rescue them while dealing with any resistance that came her way.

The sunlight was reflected in her goggles while she sipped some warm soup out a thermos. There’s a lack of security outside. It's almost like they’re asking to be raided…I’ll go around the back.

After finishing her soup, she hopped on her snowmobile and got closer. When she had a secure route, she ran across the snowy field until she reached the backdoor unnoticed. Easy enough.
To her surprise, the door came open. While keeping her senses alert, she covertly moved through the facility while dodging any enemies. She didn't know how many guards were present, and as good as she was—taking on many armed foes was unwise. Using her incredible skill, she managed to evade all hostiles.

*It should be around this corner.* The room where the hostage was had two guards standing by. Mukuro pulled out her gun equipped with a suppressor and dispatched them both within seconds. After her path was clear, she entered.

Keeping her hand on her gun’s trigger, she looked around for any danger. However, all she saw was a lone person tied to a chair with a bag over their head. The figure suggested it was a female.

“Who's there!” she yelled in a high-pitched voice.

The voice was so weird-sounding, Mukuro raised an eyebrow. "Someone hired me to rescue you from this compound. We can escape, but you have to follow my commands."

The captive gasped. “Wait, you mean the Wolf herself has come to my rescue? Or…maybe it’s better to call you Mukuro Ikusaba?”

Mukuro’s eyes widened when her name was uttered. She hadn’t heard it in so long, it felt strange to hear it said. But more importantly, she didn’t have a clue how this woman knew. “… How do you know that name?”

“Well, I know a bunch about you! You won an airsoft tournament when you were nine, you disappeared years ago in the desert, you’ve been in Fenrir for years now, and you’re also the sibling of the famous fashionista, Junko Enoshima. What a beauty that Junko Enoshima is!”

As the captive woman went on and on, Mukuro wasn't sure what to do. "Just who are you? Nobody should know what you know. Well…nobody, except for—"

“I have a great idea. I’ve always wanted to see your strength firsthand, so do something cool!”

"I'm not a performer, and we're in a highly secure area."
“Ugh, you still don’t get it. Fiiiiine, I guess I’ll have to take an initiative.”

The captive woman rose and pulled out a knife before charging at Mukuro. Ignoring this weird twist, the soldier reacted by quickly pulling out her gun. Just when she had a shot, the woman ducked and stabbed at her.

*How did she know where I’d fire!* Mukuro evaded every thrust, but the way this woman attacked her was something she'd never seen before. It was like she knew where to attack. If Mukuro's reflexes weren't so incredible, she'd be dead.

*Knowing what she knows, and these amazing movements... There’s only one person I know who could do this...* "It’s nice to see you again"—Mukuro dodged again and ripped off the woman’s mask—"Junko."

"Geez." Smiling, Junko rubbed her long, strawberry blond hair out of her face. "How many freaking hints did I need to drop for you to know it was me? You really should've caught on when I said that part about you disappearing in the desert. All these years, and I wonder if you've really changed."

Mukuro looked a little sad. “I have. That day when you said you didn’t have a use for me, I knew I needed to get stronger—and I did. I joined Fenrir and became the greatest soldier on the planet." Her eyes narrowed with serious intent. "Whatever you're trying to do, I can help you."

“Oh? I've gotten pretty far in my plans without you. I even have a reliable friend who's been helping me a bunch." Junko began playfully skipping around Mukuro. "Question: why did you never seek me out once you joined Fenrir?"

“I figured if you really needed me, you’d get my attention somehow.”

Then Junko trapped Mukuro in a headlock while rubbing her head. The freckled girl blushed. "Good call, you eyesore. Since I'm such a good sister, I guess I can let you help. Better not screw up."

“I made you a promise." Mukuro wrestled out of her sister's grip. "Did you set all of this up just to test me?"
"I had some money to blow, and I was bored. Despite all the rumors I hear, I'm a little disappointed. I could've gotten passed these guards in twenty minutes and you took twenty-four. Tsk, tsk, Sis."

“I would've been sooner, but I wanted to avoid a fight since there was a hostage.”

“Technicalities.” Junko flicked her hair while looking at Mukuro up and down. The soldier felt like she was naked all of a sudden. “Wow…you really didn’t get many gifts in the body department.”

Embarrassed, Mukuro looked away. She had known from the magazine covers that Junko's body became much more…mature in places that Mukuro's hadn't. She didn't mind since her slender body fit her fighting style, but she knew Junko would heckle her about it—not that she minded really.

“Guess it doesn’t matter since you’re a super elite soldier now…just like you wanted.”

"Tell me what you need me to do, Junko. Are you still interested in despair?"

"Naturally. In a couple of years, things are set for my…test to begin. But before that, I’ll need you to fly back to Japan with me for an initiation. I want it to be…unforgettable. You up for it?"

Meeting her sister’s eyes, Mukuro mirrored her smirk. She knew full well what “unforgettable” meant. And if Junko wanted it, Mukuro was happy to oblige. This was her chance to show her sister how useful she could be firsthand. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Heh, maybe you're not as dumb as you used the be.”

VVV

Mukuro felt like a kid again while she traveled back to her home country with her sister. Junko going on and on about a hundred different things while Mukuro sat back and tried to keep up was nostalgic. It felt like all her work from the last few years was finally bearing fruit.
The destination Junko had in mind was Giboura Middle School. Once they were at the front doors, Junko glanced at her and said, "I need to know you can kill whenever and whomever I want you to. Think your conscious can handle going on a kill streak in this middle school?"

“No problem," she answered with conviction in her voice. “If that’s what you want.” Mukuro was about to run into the school with her gun until Junko stuck her arm out.

“Ah, ah, I don’t want this to be too easy for you." Junko gestured for her gun, which Mukuro handed to her. "And make it snappy; it's hot out here."

Drawing her army knife, Mukuro ran into the school. This was her chance. After all the years of hard work, she’d finally get to prove how useful she was to Junko—the only person that’d ever love her. Just imagining Junko's smile was enough to give the soldier a limitless supply of energy.

So, tapping into her instincts, the Reaper annihilated the middle school.

The kids and adults were sheep while Mukuro was the wolf. For the girl who was known as the Reaper, slaughtering everyone inside couldn't even be called practice. She was faster, smarter, and more lethal. For a while, Mukuro's body ran on autopilot as everything moving inside the school was her prey.

It was a cycle of carnage. They’d scream and run, she’d cut them down.

Not long after it began, it was over. Mukuro didn't hear a peep as the hallways were soaked in blood like a new coat of paint. It went from screams of terror to silence. She wasn't keeping track, but she was sure it hadn't even taken her fifteen minutes to clear the place out.

Wiping blood off her freckled face, she walked outside to a clapping Junko. “I think classical music is dull,” Junko said, “but even I couldn’t help being hypnotized by that beautiful symphony of despair. Way to go, Sis!”

Blushing hard, Mukuro twiddled her thumbs together. She went from the Reaper back to Junko's sister on a dime. The sound of Junko praising her sounded like wind chimes. "T-thanks…"

"I was a little worried you'd underperform. In the end, this test wasn't necessary at all."
“Really?” Yes, I’ve proved myself to her!

"Don't worry, though… I have more fun things in store for you." Junko smirked with envy in her eyes. "As a matter of fact, I have fun things in store for this fake world, too."

“Whatever you want, Junko.”

“Let's split. I want to have my popcorn ready when we see all the family and friends on the news crying in despair!”

VVV

The incident caused by Mukuro became known as the Giboura Massacre. The nation was stunned and there was a huge manhunt for the culprits. Junko assured her they’d never be caught, and they never were. Mukuro chalked it up to her sister's amazing prudence.

Not long afterward, Junko told Mukuro to return to Fenrir until it was time to attend Hope’s Peak Academy. Complying, Mukuro flew back to the Middle East and resumed her life as a mercenary.

In a little more than a year’s time, it was time for her to travel back to Japan. Mukuro knew she'd be gone for a long time since Junko said her plans for despair were going to be set in motion soon. It had been a while since she talked to her mentor, but she figured it was only right to tell Falcon she was leaving.

After she finished explaining in his office, Falcon leaned back in his chair and asked, "So you're finally going to be with your sister? Can't say I'm not interested in who she is. Anyone who can get emotions out of you must be a damn miracle worker."

“I'll be gone for I don't know how long, maybe not ever coming back. I thought I'd thank you one last time for teaching me.” Mukuro bowed in respect.

“Well, you've more than repaid your debt to Fenrir. Someone of your ability is free to do what they want.”
“Thank you, sensei.” Mukuro was about to leave until a nagging question forced her to face Falcon again. “Sensei, if I may, can you tell me what you meant when you said you get ‘sad’ upon looking at me?”

“Is that still nagging you? You wouldn’t be able to handle the truth.”

“Try me.”

Falcon looked at the ceiling before he said, “I find your very existence tragic.”

Mukuro closed her eyes. “I’ve told you before, sensei, I feel fulfilled being a soldier. I’ve never felt so full of purpose. I’m happy with the path I’ve taken.”

“That’s not what I meant. What I find sad is”—Falcon looked into her eyes—“I see no free will when I look at you.”

“W-what…” Mukuro was completely taken aback. She didn’t have a clue where that accusation came from.

“You have all the skill in the world, Wolf. However, to this day, I’ve never been convinced this is a path you wanted for yourself. People don’t become like you just from being interested in the military, I can assure you.”

Her surprise had turned to anger. She was angry at how he'd dare question her unshakable conviction. She's the one who persevered after her parent's death, who jumped off that jet into the desert, and who worked herself to death to become the soldier she was. Right now, her existence was being questioned and it bothered her greatly.

“Heh, see? I said you wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

“With all due respect, sensei, I think that's untrue. I'm standing where I am because I wanted to. I’ve never done anything I didn’t desire.”
“Is that so?” Falcon scratched his hairy chin. “Did you hear about the Giboura Massacre? If I’m not mistaken, it happened the same week you were visiting Japan.”

If Mukuro didn’t have such control over her emotions, she would’ve given herself away after hearing that. “I heard about it. It must’ve been a group of serial killers.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Wolf. Did you forget who trained you from a mangy pup to the soldier you are? The blade work, the efficiency… Who else could it have been but you?”

Feeling like this conversation was headed south, Mukuro began reaching for her gun. “My identity was never revealed and it wasn’t on Fenrir grounds. I broke no rules.”

"What you do on your time is up to you. Though, I have to wonder why you did it. You're a lot of things, Wolf, but a sporadic mass murderer of innocents isn't one of them. Why did you target a middle school?"

Mukuro looked at the ground, choosing not to answer.

"Your sister's grip on you is stronger than I thought. I can practically see the strings coming off you."

"Lies!" yelled Mukuro, shouting at her sensei for the first time. "I…I made a promise to always make her smile. I love Junko more than anything, and she's the only one who will ever love me. She's the only one who understands me and…I'm the only one who can understand her. It's my role as her big sister to make her happy. And that…is what I choose to do…"

Falcon stared back at her before sighing and shuffling papers on his desk. "As I told you, you're free to do what you want. Good luck with whatever it is you're gonna do. Not that I think it matters anymore, but you'll always have a place in Fenrir, Wolf."

He proceeded to write some things down, clearly done talking to Mukuro. The freckled girl didn't want to end the conversation there, but she had nothing left to say.

Enveloped in bittersweet feelings, she left her sensei and Fenrir to be beside her sister once more.
It had been many years since Mukuro attended school. Predictably, changing from her usual
dynamic lifestyle of death-defying missions to the calm atmosphere of Hope's Peak Academy took
getting used to.

As Junko said, when they weren't working behind the scenes to set up her plan to trigger the rise of
despair, she was to make herself blend in. Though, Junko said Mukuro was "repulsive" enough to
draw attention away from herself regardless of how suspicious her actions were.

One day, she sat under a tree while reading her favorite military magazine after school. She’d
occasionally look up to see the energetic Ultimates of her class playing around the track field. She
tried running against them once and nearly overcame Sakura Ogami. Despite feeling as if she’d
win the next time, Junko advised her to turn down her “freakishness” a bit.

Mukuro would sometimes see the seventy-seventh class roam around, always led by their teacher
or the girl who always had a game console in her hand. They weren't important to their plans, so
the soldier ignored them.

“Hey, Ikusaba!” yelled Makoto, who was running towards her. The soldier was puzzled as to what
he could want. The two had never really interacted before. “You forgot this.”

Mukuro saw her favorite pen in his hand. How did I forget that? She grabbed the pen before
putting in her pocket. “Thank you, Naegi.”

“No problem.” When Makoto looked as if he was going to walk away, he scratched his chin. "Say,
if you don't mind me asking, why do you seclude yourself like this all the time? You're even more
distant than Kirigiri."

Mukuro was a little surprised. No one ever asked a general question about her like that. "I like my
privacy is all."

"Guess it balances out since Enoshima is super-outgoing. Then again, she is a fashionista."

“Yeah…” Mukuro looked down. “It’s always been like that.”
There was silence before Makoto surprised Mukuro yet again when he sat next to her and asked, “So how did you become the Ultimate Soldier? Did you have to…kill people?”

He’s asking about me again…? The freckled girl was starting to suspect that Junko put him up to this, but she couldn't see why her sister would. Shaking off her shock, she focused on answering the question with a lie. “No, I won airsoft competitions overseas and stuff. I’ve never killed.”

Mukuro could see the relief enter Makoto's eyes. She guessed there were rumors about what she had done to claim her extremely uncommon title. “I thought so. You didn’t seem like the type to me.”

“What do you mean?”

Makoto rubbed the back of his head with a wry smile. “You always seemed, well…you seem like you’re really nice and supportive.”

It was then Mukuro’s heart started beating fast as if she was running through gunfire on a minefield. She had to look away from Makoto out of embarrassment. The only time she felt this way was with her sister, but even that didn't feel like a perfect comparison. This feeling…

“Your talent is neat, too. Not many talents sound cooler than Ultimate Soldier.”

“I-it’s nothing…” she stuttered, still unable to look at him.

“I think it’s awesome. If I was in an airsoft competition, I’d want to use a rocket launcher or something.”

“Hehe…” That giggle was slight and could barely be called a giggle at all, but it surprised Mukuro when it escaped from her lips nonetheless. "That's highly impractical. Besides, in those tournaments, you'll need to move fast. You'd need to travel light with a rifle and sidearm at the most. For a beginner like you, I'd suggest using a simple desert eagle or—"

Mukuro stopped herself when she realized what was happening. Am I…rambling?
“Or what?” asked Makoto, who looked interested.

"O-oh, uh, I can't remember. Sorry for getting carried away."

“Nah, it’s cool you’re so excited about your talent. It’s not like I can brag about being lucky all the time.” Makoto placed a hand on Mukuro's shoulder—which felt like electricity surging through her body—and smiled warmly. "You're really cool."

At this point, she felt hotter and her composure was starting to come apart. All she could muster was a murmur as she said, "T-thanks. I…I think it's cool how you can be so optimistic without a talent and all…"

“You think so?”

Before she responded, she heard one of their classmates yell Makoto's name. When Makoto saw it was Sayaka, he rose and wiped himself off—much to Mukuro's dismay. "Sorry, I gotta go. I hope we can talk again, Ikusaba. And I think it'd be nice if you were less distant." With a final wave, he departed.

“B-by...” muttered Mukuro, waving in vain since Makoto was already gone.

She rubbed her forehead in a daze. In all her adventures, she hadn't experienced a feeling like that before. Not knowing what to think, she rose and went to find the one person she knew could tell her what was wrong.

The sun was disappearing as Mukuro reached her and Junko's dorm. These accommodations were just for show and not permanent. They rarely came here except for uneventful days when Junko wasn’t doing anything.

Upon entering the room, Mukuro found her sister plopped face-first on the bed. "Junko," said Mukuro, shaking her sister. "I need to talk to you."

Junko put some toadstools on her head before looking up with depressed eyes. "Uh…what do you want? Can't you see your cute, little sister is trying to rest? You're such a pest...."
“But it’s really important. There was this boy…”

Junko popped up on put on a cutesy face. "Aww, so cute! Give me all the little details, girlfriend!"

"Well, I was sitting under a tree reading, and he returned my pen. Then he started asking about me and saying all these nice things…” Mukuro could feel her heart race while she replayed it in her head. "He even smiled at me…and it was genuine. I felt really weird, and…I don't know what to think. I wanted to ask you what—"

Junko put on a pair of glasses, tied her hair in a ponytail, and undid a button on her shirt. "Allow me to explain. What you experienced is a phenomenon called affection. When Makoto Naegi complimented you like no one ever has—for obvious reasons—long unused feelings of infatuation appeared."

"I see… So, you're saying this is kind of what love feels like…” The more Mukuro thought about it, the more it made sense. From all the accounts of what love was like, it sounded similar to what she was feeling. Now that she knew what was wrong with her, she was still conflicted. "What should I do? Do I…confess? Do you think it'd work, Junko?"

"Negative. I can see three flaws in this reasoning. Number one: you're you. Number two: he clearly favors girls like Sayaka Maizono and Kyoko Kirigiri over you. Number three: you're you."

Kirigiri? Mukuro didn’t recall seeing Makoto and Kyoko being close. “Hey, you said that last one twice…”

“I thought it needed repeating,” said Junko in her normal voice as she threw off the glasses and put her hair back in twin-tails. “By the way, how did I do? Were those transitions too sloppy or unconvincing? I think I’m getting the hang of it, but I’m still unsatisfied.”

“This is serious, Junko…” Mukuro sat on the bed’s edge while squeezing her palms together.

Junko crossed her legs while rolling her eyes. “Get a grip. Didn’t you hear anything I said?”

“You said no one would ever smile at me like you… Still, it felt so real…”
“Hellooooo! Naegi is such a sap, he’d literally treat anything nicely. There was nothing unique about that experience you had. Like I articulated, there are many other options better than you.”

“… Yeah… yeah, you’re right.” Crestfallen, the soldier bent her head downward. She couldn’t recall feeling a sadness of this nature before. For someone with such a great grip on their composure, she’d had done anything but that the last few hours.

Then, a crazy thought crossed her mind. So crazy, she can't believe she looked at Junko and said it. "Junko, maybe…maybe you don't have to have your test for hope and despair here—" She stopped herself when Junko stared back at her with a blank expression. Mukuro knew she was not happy.

“Excuse me?”

No words came out Mukuro's mouth. She had a bad feeling before she said it, and now she fully regretted it. There was nothing in the world that saddened her more than when Junko looked at her the way she was now. But, Mukuro couldn't deny those were her feelings at the moment.

Unblinking, Junko said, "Unbelievable. One chump compliments you, and you want to throw away everything we worked for, our entire lives together…and the promise you made me?"

“Never!” Mukuro twiddled her fingers. “That’s not what I meant…”

"It sounds like you're going turncoat on me." Junko inched closer to Mukuro's face so they were mere centimeters apart. "We're all we got left, Sis. I’m the only one who’ll ever really get the real you. Are you going to abandon me yet again?"

"I never meant to abandon—"

“Are you?”

After staring back at her sister for a moment, Mukuro closed her eyes and took a deep breath. What am I thinking?
It was true that tender moment she had with Makoto was nice, but she couldn’t forget what Junko was to her. She was her world. She was the reason she jumped from a jet and trained in Fenrir. Junko was likely the reason she was alive. And she’d do anything to make her happy.

With unwavering eyes, Mukuro already knew her answer. "Of course not. Sorry for even bringing it up. It'll never happen again."

Junko smiled from ear to ear. “Atta girl! Now, I’m gonna need you to do something mega important!”

“Anything.”

“I need you to pose as me.”

"Oka—" Mukuro's eyes widened after what Junko said clicked with her. "Uh…you want me to—"

“Dress as me, yeah.”

Stunned, she backed off the bed before falling to the floor in a panic. Just the thought of her trying to be and dress like Junko was unthinkable. "I-I can’t do that! How's if that even… I can't… Please don't make me do that!"

"Aww stop whining, you big baby. Of course, you perfectly emulating me is as likely as a three-headed dinosaur with wings flying out of my ass, but I need you to be somewhat acceptable.”

“B-b-but why me! It will never work!”

Junko put a hand on her hip. "Not with that attitude. Now hold still!" The fashionista tackled her sister and began ripping off her clothes. "Let’s start with the November issue, shall we?"

“Stop it, Junko! Noooooo!”

Mukuro had witnessed her parents burning to death, been homeless, braved countless
environments, and survived the incredibly harsh training of Fenrir. But, if someone asked, the training Junko put her through to emulate her was the low-light of her life. Putting on make-up, flashy outfits, and other accessories while Junko laughed non-stop would haunt her forever.

VVV

The year at Hope’s Peak Academy went smoothly for the Despair Sisters.

As Junko commanded, Mukuro led the siege of the Steering Committee's lab—allowing them both to contact Izuru Kamakura. In all her life, that was the only time she felt true fear. In the face of the artificially created monstrosity, her years of training felt like they were wasted.

Not long after, they met Ryouta Mitarai, which Junko was extremely excited about. Mukuro didn't know how her sister knew, but his talent for subliminal messaging was proving invaluable to their endeavors.

The insanity only grew as the sisters trapped the student council until they slaughtered each other, the event that became known as the Tragedy of Hope's Peak Academy. It allowed Junko to frame Izuru and incite mass hysteria by informing the Reserve Course of his existence and how they were funding it.

Soon, as the unrest on campus grew to dangerous heights, the Despair Sisters were confronted by students of the seventy-seventh class, which Junko had expressed interest in after speaking with the corrupted Mikan.

While Junko was dealing with the others, Mukuro was currently being held off by Peko. The two only needed a glance to know they were enemies and that they were both very capable. While Peko was an incredible swordsman and older, Mukuro's prowess proved too much to overcome.

“Ugh!” yelled Peko, hitting the wet ground.

Rain ran down her wet face as Mukuro smiled cockily. "This is my victory."

“… Are you even human?” Peko looked up at her with a crimson glare. "What does one have to go through to obtain strength like that? I've fought some of the cruelest humans of the underworld, and never once encountered someone like you..."
Mukuro pointed her knife at her. “I was a girl who was born to destroy. That’s all.”

“Then tell me this: why did I lose to you?”

“There are a few reasons, but if I had to choose one…I'd say it's because you're too soft. Your blade lacks the apathy to eliminate the enemy without hesitation.”

“I see…” To Mukuro's surprise, Peko started laughing. “I guess I have Nanami and the others to blame for that.” Peko smirked at Mukuro. “I suppose I can be happy I’ve beaten you in that regard.”

Mukuro raised her blade. “Celebrate your hollow victory in death.”

Just as the soldier was about to end it, Peko rolled behind her before running in the opposite direction. Mukuro could've easily pursued her, but decide against it. **She was here to hold me off. I need to get to Junko!**

After the fight, Mukuro arrived to see Junko with Chisa in her grasp. On her command, as Chisa watched the video, Mukuro used a pair of needles to stimulate the pleasure center of her brain. Mukuro was very familiar with the body and all its parts, so it was a simple matter for her.

Afterward, Junko made Mukuro stand patrol outside, so she never got to see the execution of Chiaki. She found out through Junko who told her to join in the “festivities.” The soldier could still remember the exuberance the fashionista had. It was a happiness she hadn't seen from her before. It looked…brand new, as Mukuro would put it.

“Junko?” said Mukuro. “Are you feeling alright?”

Junko was skipping while smiling ear to ear in a wizard outfit. "Never better! Not only did I conduct my first execution of that nobody Chiaki Nanami, the chumps of the seventy-seventh class are now my pawns."

“It’s just that your acting weirdly happy—well, more so than usual. Did you have some grudge against Nanami?”
Mukuro thought her sister ignored her because she didn’t answer at first, but she eventually said, “Nope.”

The soldier didn’t get to pry further as Junko opened a door to a dark room with a checkerboard-patterned floor. "Oh, Nanami!" yelled Junko as she skipped into the room. "You still—"

_Huh?_ thought Mukuro, seeing her sister's happiness vanish. Upon observation, she was looking at some bloodstains on the floor—bloodstains with no body around it. "What happened here…? Where's the girl you executed?"

The look on Junko's face could best be described as "detached."

Finally, she said, "Son of a bitch," before turning around and walking back out.

Confused Mukuro said, “Hold on, what happened here. Did she live? Do you need me to—”

“Forget it, eyesore. Nothing you could do about it, anyway.”

The soldier was still puzzled. Based on what Junko described, Chiaki should've been far dead by now. However, Junko said to leave it be, so she left it at that.

“I’m gonna need you to help escort the seventy-seventh class to the private chamber.” Junko’s wide grin returned. “More positive reinforcement is in order, hehe.”

Mukuro had no clue what she was doing, but Junko was having private chats with all the newly corrupted seventy-seventh class. Even for someone who’d seen many things, Mukuro had to admit being uneasy seeing the unsettling sight that was the despair-driven Ultimates.

She knew upon seeing them...they were all different entities entirely. Especially when she saw Peko who went from seeming soft to having a lethal look in her eye. The soldier almost drew her knife when their eyes met from the pure malevolence, but the sword master smirked before leaving with Fuyuhiko.
After their “despair therapy,” as Junko put it, the next phase began. Once more, Mukuro was unsure how she accomplished it—she knew Yasuke had something to do with it—Junko altered her memories and assumed the false identity of Ryoko Otonashi.

Very begrudgingly, Mukuro assumed the identity of her sister. Truthfully, Mukuro didn't have a fun time. There were interesting times, admittedly fun moments where she helped Makoto, but all in all, this was something she never wanted to think about again.

When it was over, Junko completed her test and murdered Yasuke brutally. Not long afterward, she was putting on some make-up in the bathroom while Mukuro was wiping her own off like it was vandalism on a wall.

“Guess it’s true what they say,” said Junko, smirking amusingly. “You can dress up a pig any way you want, but in the end—it’s still a pig.”

“It’s not funny…”

“Well, I had a despairingly wonderful time with all this. Also, based on what I remember, I’ve graded your performance as me.”

“Yeah?”

“You sucked. That was a huge, yet very funny mistake I’m not making again.”

Mukuro put her head down, embarrassment and shame visible on her face. She knew in her heart it was a bad idea from the beginning. While she was relieved she wouldn’t be subjugated to that cruel punishment again, she felt useless. “But what about needing someone to impersonate you?”

“After some…change in the circumstances, it's better to do something else entirely. I'll give you the details when it's time. Now that I've experimented with everything I wanted…it's time for the games to begin.”

While Mukuro felt happy there was still a purpose for her, she couldn't shake her sad feeling. As time went on, it felt like she was recognizing her sister less and less. Despite all her work to become the greatest soldier in the world, reuniting with her, and aiding her in her plans for despair…it felt like her beloved sister was farther from her than ever before.
Time passed, and despair had spread like locus. The mass suicide of the Reserve Course took place, Hope’s Peak Academy shut down officially, the seventy-seventh class—or Ultimate Despair—had been let loose, and the world was enveloped in a massive epidemic call The Tragedy.

Just like when they were little girls, no matter the scale, Junko did what she set out to do again.

As Junko conducted from behind the scenes, their class made the school into a fortress from the violent outside world. Thanks to their classes’ efforts and help from the Future Foundation, the school became impenetrable. After months of waiting, their classmate was sedated and underwent the memory altering process.

Currently, the two sisters were standing on the outskirts of the academy after evading the surveillance the Future Foundation had on the school.

Junko gave Mukuro a letter to read describing what she wanted the soldier to do and what Junko had planned. When Mukuro asked her sister why didn't just tell her, Junko said, “Because I took the time to write that, dummy.” After Junko mockingly asked Mukuro if she had the capabilities to read, the soldier scanned the letter.

When Mukuro finished reading it, she closed her eyes for a moment before she said, “… If this is what you want, I’ll do it.”

“Don’t screw this up.” Junko turned her back before walking away.

Mukuro clenched her fist before yelling, “Junko!”

Stopping she said, “Ugh, what? Did you really want me to not kill Naegi that bad?”

“… Will it ever be like it used to be with us? Will I ever get to see you again…?”
Junko didn’t turn around. “What does it matter?”

“Because… I really do… love you, Junko…”

Turning her head slightly so Mukuro could see a slight smile, Junko said, “Gross.” After that, she walked away.

Mukuro did the same as she walked in the opposite direction. Once again, the Despair Sisters split up and Mukuro had a mission to complete for her sister’s sake. Just like always, whether it was when she was young, homeless, in Fenrir, or Hope’s Peak Academy, Mukuro would keep one goal in mind. And that was making the person she loved the most maintain her smile.

For she was a stray hound grateful to have the most radiant star shine beside her.
Chapter 32: Save the Denial Love

The crackling fire and chirping insects could be heard as Chiaki didn't know what to take away from Mukuro's tale.

As Mukuro was retelling her life, Chiaki kept silent out of respect…and fear the soldier would get mad. The gamer made mental notes to save any questions she had, but she had so many questions. She didn't know where to start remembering. The story was crazy for even someone who's been through what she has.

Where do I even start…she thought. Chiaki cleared her dry throat before she said, “What happened after you and Junko split up?”

Mukuro played with a piece of her long hair. "Nothing much to tell. I took on the persona of Black Rider, became Takara's bodyguard, Enigma showed up randomly one day, you saw me at the Despara Carnival, then I came for you."

“And, if you weren't lying, then Junko really is the mastermind behind everything, right?”

“…Yes.”

“Why did you lie?”

“It was to throw off Chisa Yukizome long enough for the raid to start.”

Throw off Ms. Yukizome? She wondered why Mukuro would need to use such a lie for the housekeeper. Chiaki didn't go farther since it would spiral into a never-ending chain of questions. There was a more pressing question she wanted to be answered once and for all. "Then…is Junko really dead?"

Staring at the dark, starry sky, Mukuro said, “She is.”
“But why would she make a way you wouldn’t be in the killing game and not do it for herself? That’s strange, I think.”

“You would’ve had to ask her that. Junko’s done a thousand things I never fully understood.”

Looking at the fire, Chiaki desperately wanted to accept Junko was dead. She should’ve been overjoyed to hear Mukuro confirm what she hoped to be true…but as always, it didn't fill her with joy. And she could never figure out why. "What happened to Junko to make her like that? Do you really not know?"

Mukuro’s gaze narrowed. “Like I told you, she just…changed. I never noticed anything until she told me about her interest in despair.”

From her tone, Mukuro sounded honest. The gamer was sure that was the truth, or at least the Mukuro in front of her thought it was the truth. "And what about you?"

The soldier looked confused. “What about me?”

“Are you really okay with everything you did? Sacrificing your childhood, constantly being put down, killing people, never experiencing real friendship… Don’t you ever look back and think following Junko was a mistake?”

“No,” Mukuro answered without hesitation. The unwavering tone of her voice made Chiaki flinch a bit. “Everything I did was to make my sister happy. I don’t regret any of it.”

The gamer tilted her head. "I don't have one, but I get wanting to make your only sister happy. Still, from the story you told, it doesn't sound like a normal relationship. You said it made you angry, but…I think your teacher might've been right.”

Chiaki gulped when Mukuro gave her a cold stare. The way Mukuro could shift from being mellow to intimidating was something the gamer doubted words could properly describe.

“I'll tell you the same thing I told him: I made a promise to always make Junko smile. As she said, she was the only one who'd ever understand me and vice versa.”
"How do you know nobody else would understand you?"

"You don't think I tried? When I was younger, I couldn't get any attention from anyone. Eventually, I just stop trying all together…"

Putting a finger to her chin, Chiaki thought of something. "Do you think Junko might've been holding you back?"

Mukuro’s expression went from confused to baffled. "If it wasn’t for Junko, I’d have no one. If anything, she’s what allowed me to get as far as I did."

More than ever, Chiaki thought carefully about her words. The fact there was a killer—a world-class one—handcuffed to her who had a temper when it came to talking bad about Junko was firmly in her mind.

Hugging her knees, Chiaki said, "Maybe you stopped giving it your all to connect to other people because Junko convinced you there was no point. Plus, before you reached middle school, you had already gone into training because of your desire to help her. Maybe if you had a normal life of going to school and growing, you could've found people who liked you for you, possibly."

"That’s ridiculous. Junko’s the one who said it, so how could she be wrong? You’ve seen firsthand how incredible she is at planning."

"I have…” Chiaki shook her head. "But she’s not all-powerful. What about that moment with Naegi and the rest of your class. You were all friends."

"Junko was the popular one while I didn’t converse with people often. And Naegi…” Mukuro shuffled her jaw. “Like Junko said, it was nothing.”

"That's not true," Chiaki said in a firm voice. "You're listening to Junko blindly. The others could've liked you if you gave it a chance. Also, even if Naegi never liked you the way you wanted, you could've still been friends."

Mukuro simply stared back for a moment before furrowing her brow. "What do you know about it? I would always see your class having fun on campus without a care in the world. None of you would last a day as me."
“You’re only saying that since you see it from the outside. All of us had lots of problems, but we all helped each other to make them smaller. We support each—” Chiaki closed her eyes. “We supported each other.”

“It must not have been hard, with you being the beloved class rep.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong. Actually, I used to think like you.”

Mukuro raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure.”

"No, really. Mom never gave me much attention, I was always made fun of for being a gamer geek without a real talent, and I didn't have any real friends growing up. I was alone with nothing but my talent, just like you."  

Mukuro still looked skeptical, but she seemed interested. It was enough to inspire Chiaki to keep going in hopes some of what she was saying resonated.

"It's not until I came to Hope's Peak that Ms. Yukizome helped me see how my talent could make friends. Afterward, it became so much easier to open up to people who were different from me.”

“Well, I suppose you were just lucky. Some people don't get those kinds of choices... Do you really think ‘opening up' would've changed anything?”

"I'm saying that instead of having someone positive like Ms. Yukizome help, you had Junko using your talent for her own purposes while deflating your confidence. Ms. Yukizome was everything to me, well before...her change.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Well, uncomfortable for Chiaki since the gamer wasn't sure if Mukuro cared about what she did to her former teacher. But, Chiaki knew her rebuttal must've struck some nerve because Mukuro looked unsure.

Chiaki decided to up the ante. "There was a boy I had feelings for like you did Naegi. He was my first friend, and I treasured every moment we spent together. Unfortunately, it didn't end well because of his lack of confidence and, err, your crazy sister—but it was an important bond I'm
happy I got to experience. The point I'm making is, there's more to Mukuro Ikusaba than being a soldier."

Mukuro looked like she was thinking but still had a frustrated expression. "You're saying all my problems are because I loved my sister? We were all we had, and you think I should've just abandoned her for my own selfish reasons?"

“No, that's not…” Chiaki felt as if she wasn't making her point well enough. She knew what she wanted to say, but not how to. While wishing Miaya would fall from the sky, her eyes came across a small puddle. That gave her an idea.

Chiaki took her index finger and drew a straight line, making the water flow down. "I saw someone do this in a game once. This line represents your life."

As was the theme of this talk, Mukuro looked bemused, as if Chiaki was some kind of quack. "A line you drew in the mud filled with dirty water is my life…?"

“Yeah… kinda? Just like this line, you only followed one path in life—the path Junko told you to. You never bothered to branch out and explore.”

Chiaki drew two more lines branching off from the original line she drew. Water flowed down them as well. "If you would've made just a single choice against Junko, your life could've gone in a different direction. And if you kept doing that…"

The gamer kept branching off every new line she drew until many different lines were spreading out like roots. Throughout, Mukuro just kept staring.

Once Chiaki was done, she wiped her hands. "See what I mean? To you, one choice might've seemed pointless, but if you would've kept following your own path, you could've achieved a totally different life, I think."

“All that is pointless. My sister's talent let her see these types of things and how they'll turn out.”

“From how you described it, Junko's theory was no matter what you did, your path would've always led back to the original line. But I say”—Chiaki clenched her fist—“anyone’s future is an endless sea of possibilities not even Junko can fully grasp.”
She had intended to sound full of conviction, but Chiaki’s voice was still a bit shaky—mostly because the gamer was terrified of the woman across from her. But she was confident in her answer.

Mukuro looked like she was searching for some kind of counterargument. “Why would I trust you over my sister? You say Junko was misguided…but the one time you two came face-to-face, it ended in a resounding defeat for you.”

Trying not to look too dejected, Chiaki looked away. It stung, but she couldn't deny what Mukuro said, especially since the gamer herself fully believed she wasn't on the level of Junko. Then again, she doubted anyone truly was.

“… I can’t deny that. I had a chance to stop her, and I failed completely, letting everyone down.” Chiaki’s expression became more serious. “But I was given another chance to help. And this time, I want to save as many people as I can…including you.”

“What would you be ‘saving’ me from exactly?”

“You, or it's better to say the 'you' Junko made. I would've been the same loner if I hadn't listened to Ms. Yukizome, or I would've stayed depressed if Miaya wasn't there. I always thought you were as full of despair as Junko, but now I'm sure you aren't. All you need is a friend to help you see your talent can accomplish all sorts of things.”

The freckled girl raised her head, her eyes softer than before. ”And who would this ‘friend' be? Who would bother helping someone who was raised around battle and death like me?”

“Well…” Chiaki gathered up her courage and held out her hand towards Mukuro. “I can help you.”

Mukuro looked surprised and, quite frankly, Chiaki was surprised she came to this resolution, too. She originally thought she’d convince the soldier to talk to Miaya, but the gamer had gotten so in the moment, she volunteered herself.

But Chiaki had to almost hypnotize herself into thinking of Mukuro as that little girl who didn’t have anyone to help her. If she thought of Mukuro as the violent soldier who brainwashed her teacher and killed innocents for a second, she’d want to hate her.
"You’d…help me? After everything that’s happening, you'd just forget about it and we’d become friends just like that?"

“I’m not saying it’d be easy. You've done many bad things—bad things I resent… Still, you’re saying Junko's dead so you can start over. If you tell people the story you told me, maybe it could help. I'll help you, also."

For the first time, Mukuro smirked as if she was holding in a laugh.

Chiaki puffed out her cheeks a bit because it appeared as if Mukuro was taking everything she was saying as a joke. Considering how hard it was reaching the answer she did, the gamer didn't appreciate it. "Hey, I'm being serious."

“I’m starting to understand what my sister meant when she described you.”

“Huh?” Chiaki took an immediate interest in how Junko described her, more so than she would've thought. "What did she say?"

Instead of answering the question, Mukuro asked, “So, you think I should abandon my mission, take you back to the Future Foundation, turn myself in, hope your domineering vice chairman gives me a slap on the wrist, and then we can have a nice sleepover?"

“Well…when you say it like that it sounds kind of…”

“Because it's impossible. Too much has happened to just forget and forgive. Both of us are who we are, and it's pointless to think otherwise.”

“But, then why did you bother telling me your life story? Since you did, it must be because you wanted someone to talk about it with, right?"

“I told you because I didn’t have a reason not to.”
The gamer saw an opening. “I think for a long time, you wanted to tell someone that story. It’s like I said in the interrogation room: you’re different from Junko. Deep down, a part of you thinks—or at least hopes—you can still find a better purpose in life. I’m here to tell you it’s possible, but you can’t listen to Junko or Enigma.”

“And again, I’ll ask you: how would that work?”

Just pretend she’s my classmate, Chiaki thought to herself. “I don’t know, but it’s got to be better than what’s happening now. If you just changed that devotion from your sister to helping people, you’d be invaluable for the world. Just maybe, little by little, you can redeem yourself.”

Chiaki took a deep breath, keeping any contempt she had down while thinking of how Miaya would deliver this next line. “Because”—Chiaki smiled warmly at Mukuro—“I think you’re a really beautiful person deep down.”

After that line was spoken, two interesting reactions happened on both sides. Mukuro’s eyes became saucers and she scrambled to turn her back on Chiaki.

At the same time, Chiaki had taken that as the soldier being angry and going for her gun. The result was their handcuffs tugging them back towards each other in such a way that made them hit the ground.

"Ow," groaned Chiaki. "I forget we were handcuffed together..."

Mukuro sat back up. “I did as well.”

“I thought you were so mad, I was going to be shot…”

“I wasn’t angry. Just…surprised. What you did reminded me of something…”

Rubbing her head, Chiaki took another look at Mukuro. With fear not dictating her mind, she noticed the soldier had a strange demeanor at the moment. She was looking at the ground with an awkward expression. She wasn't sure, but it reminded her of that moment in the interrogation room when Mukuro lost her composure.
Did I offend her? thought Chiaki. “Well, if you’re not mad, my offer still stands. I’d be willing to try if you would.”

Chiaki kept her hand outstretched to Mukuro, not knowing what the soldier would choose. A nagging voice in the back of the gamer's head was still screaming at her not to trust Mukuro. Then Miaya’s voice played in her head, reminded her how holding on to hatred and despair can ruin a person.

The “repeatedly tell myself she’s one of my classmates” method Chiaki kept using was the only thing that seemed to work. She had sympathy for Mukuro because of her rough childhood and—most of all—having to live with Junko. The gamer figured she’d lose her mind in those circumstances too.

But the same words would keep playing in her head. She’s the one who corrupted Ms. Yukizome. She killed all those innocent people and helped Junko ruin my life. She’d kill me without a second thought if she had to.

Casting aside this hate was even harder than dealing with her feelings towards Chisa. At least with Chisa, despite her extremely morbid acts, she had kind memories to recall and her new depravity wasn’t her fault.

If she was fake or real, none of those excuses could be used with Mukuro. This was the first time they’d spoken. Even knowing her supposed life story, it didn’t change she was her prisoner and a relative stranger.

“Chiaki Nanami,” said Mukuro, smiling a little, “you’re an interesting person.”

Gasping, the gamer couldn't believe her ears. She knew a lot of words could describe her, but interesting was certainly one she hadn't heard many times. Of course, Mukuro could've been using it in a negative connotation. "So, you’ll accept my friendship?"

Mukuro didn't speak at first, making the gamer hold her breath. Chiaki felt her heart pound when Mukuro reached out and grabbed her hand. At that moment, Chiaki was convinced she had gotten through to Junko Enoshima's sister, taking her away from the side of despair. It felt like a true victory.

But then, Mukuro pushed Chiaki’s hand before backing away.
"It’s too late, Nanami," said Mukuro, her eyes downcast. "We’re not kids anymore. We’ve both made choices and chosen our sides. I will always be Mukuro Ikusaba, the Ultimate Soldier…and the sister of Junko Enoshima. And nothing will ever change that."

With Mukuro’s response saddening her, Chiaki closed her eyes. It felt like her final chance to not only avoid being taken to Enigma but to also destroy a looming shadow of Junko. She knew the soldier would refuse; however, for a fleeting moment, the gamer thought Mukuro would agree.

“But,” said Chiaki, making a final plea, “why do you want to do this? I’m sure now…you’re not interested in despair, getting revenge, or The Tragedy. If you’re telling the truth about your sister being dead…then why don’t you want to find your own future?”

Mukuro rested an arm on her knee while staring at the dwindling flames. "I’m a soldier. All I want to do is follow the orders my sister entrusted with me. That’s…all I can do…"

“Mukuro, you can do more than your talent—”

“This is done.” Mukuro closed her eyes. "I suggest you sleep; we have a long way to walk tomorrow. It goes without saying trying anything won't end well."

Well…I tried… Chiaki rested her head on her knees, seeing Mukuro wasn’t going to listen anymore. One might think she should’ve stayed awake and attacked Mukuro while she was sleeping, but the gamer wasn’t going to fall into that fallacy.

Just when Chiaki was going to close her eyes, Mukuro said, “You’re the first person I’ve told that story… Thank you for listening.”

“… You really are the real Mukuro, aren’t you?”

There was no answer. Chiaki took off her blazer and used it as a pillow. Even with her extreme exhaustion from the day's events, her nerves didn't allow her to sleep easily. Being outdoors and having Mukuro close gave her insomnia.

As the gamer settled for looking at the dying flames, thoughts popped into her head. Did Junko
suspect that Kamakura saved me before she began the killing game? If she did...why didn't she do anything about it then? Why have Mukuro come after me after the killing game? Why come after me at all...?

These mysteries and more flooded Chiaki's mind as the fire finally dwindled out, leaving her in a blanket of darkness.

VVV

At the main headquarters of the Future Foundation, all the division leaders had gathered due to the recent incident. As Kazuo commanded, they were to be there at once. Kyosuke wanted the matter to be more private, but the chairman had convinced him this must be something all the division leaders were brought up to speed about. Even Kyoko had been given clearance for this trip.

As expected, tensions were high after the news was announced. Especially for Miaya.

Oh, Chiaki... While her co-workers were discussing the matter among each other, the therapist was racked with concern over Chiaki. She couldn't imagine how afraid the gamer must've been, and what in the world the Despairs wanted with her. Miaya couldn't imagine a crueler irony than the girl who was tortured by Junko later being taken hostage by her sister.

“What the hell were you thinking, Yukizome!” yelled Juzo, banging on the desk. “You knew the rules when it comes to Despairs! You let freakin’ Mukuro Ikusaba waltz right into one of our bases!”

Chisa had her head down with a shame-filled expression. "I have no excuses… I became too headstrong and the situation turned into one I could no longer handle… Because of my actions, my Chiaki has been taken from me once again…"

When Chisa buried her face in her palms, Juzo rubbed the back of his head. As gruff as the boxer was, Miaya knew what close friends he and the housekeeper were. “Yukizome… I didn’t mean…”

"Yukizome will be reprimanded when the time comes," said Kyosuke. "Right now, we need to deal with the current predicament: Mukuro Ikusaba has supposedly returned and has taken one of our own, Chiaki Nanami.”
"Well," said Koichi, adjusting his fedora, "as many questions as there are hanging in the air, I suppose we can start with this one: why go to all the trouble to take Nanami? From how it all went down, it looks conclusive she was the target."

Gozu huffed loudly, meaning he wanted to speak. "It's also interesting they wanted her alive. This is the first time the Despairs have launched such a coordinated attack directly at the Future Foundation. Whatever the reason may be, obtaining Nanami was very important to someone."

“Maybe this was revenge,” said Daisaku in his light voice. "Nanami was the one who ended the Despara Carnival and took down a high-profile target, Kitta Takara. Perhaps this is the Despairs way of taking someone that’s become important in this organization. After all, revenge is a dish best served cold.”

Miaya used this cue to jump in. “Yukizome, are you absolutely sure Ikusaba didn’t give any other motive for wanting Nanami?”

When Chisa recounted the story of what happened, she had told them Black Rider revealed herself to be Mukuro Ikusaba. Apparently, she wanted to kidnap Chiaki to fulfill the wishes of the mysterious Despair, Enigma. Nothing else was known at the moment but that.

"… No. All she said was Enigma gave her orders to take Chiaki. I don't know anything more than that… I'm sorry."

Seiko stared at the table. “If that’s all we have to go off of, we’ll have to assume this was an act of retaliation. If they wanted her alive… do you think they’ll broadcast a live torture to demoralize us?”

The therapist shuttered, Seiko's claim created a terribly vivid picture in her mind. Observing the first mutual killing game was bad enough. Seeing her former patient being tortured again was too cruel to bear.

Ruruka fed Sonosuke one of her treats. “That’s the least she’ll have to worry about. If that was really Mukuro Ikusaba, she’s basically in a den of tigers wearing a dress full of meat. Does our oh so famous detective have any leads?”

Kyoko rolled her eyes at the confectioner’s sarcasm. “Immediately after I was informed of Nanami’s capture, I suspended all my branches activity to search. Unfortunately, I've found
"I've got nothing on my end either," said Juzo. "With Ikusaba having the resume she does, it's only natural she can make herself a ghost. We don't even have a damn trail…"

"Naturally," added Kazuo, "I'm sure we're all grieving over our comrades. But, if we can't right this wrong, it'll send a harmful ripple effect across the organization. If the populace finds out we not only failed to stop Ultimate Despair, but also finds out that one of them is alive…it'll be very difficult to maintain the backing the Future Foundation has."

Kyosuke narrowed his eyes. "That's putting it mildly. We're already under some heat for still not apprehending the remnants, and now this happens… Who knows how our subordinates will react if another killing game is allowed to happen on our watch."

"That's not the biggest issue at hand…" murmured Kyoko, her eyes focused. "I'm infuriated at Nanami's capture, but there's an underlying question we aren't acknowledging. If subterfuge was used to allow Mukuro Ikusaba not to be in the mutual killing game…then we should consider the possibility that someone else might be alive…"

Kyoko didn't need to say the name for Miaya to know who she meant. She doubted anyone in the room needed it to be said. The extended silence among them was proof. It was an ugly truth, but an outcome they must consider.

The old chairman adjusted his glasses. "While Yukizome said when Ikusaba was pressed, she claimed Junko Enoshima had indeed committed suicide—it would be wise to consider Kyoko's theory about the worst possible scenario being real."

"Damn..." murmured Ruruka, frustrated. "Then what the hell have we been doing for the past year! Are we being played...?"

With Miaya being a master of reading the mood, she could see her fellow division leaders beginning to lose morale. After all the progress they've made, the prospect of it all being a facade and Junko messing around spread a feeling up inadequacy. Luckily, she was one of the greatest therapists.

Miaya made Usami blow smoke out of her ears as the rabbit said, "Hey, what with all the long
faces? So things are going bad at the moment. The reason we formed this organization was for these exact situations. We can worry about Junko Enoshima later. Right now, we all have a fellow leader and a friend in trouble!”

As Miaya intended, that outburst broke the tension. Everyone looked at the therapist as Usami said, "We need an immediate plan of action. There have been no broadcasts so we can assume Chiaki is still alive somewhere. Now's not the time for us to be indecisive!"

“I agree with Gekkogahara,” said Kyoko. "Chairman Tengan, would it be possible to suspend all operations entirely and begin an all-out manhunt for Ikusaba? Any cooperation from outside organization could help, too. For the reasons stated, the stakes are too great for failure, and…I wish to see Nanami returned safely."

Kazuo leaned back in his chair. “As for help from ally organizations, I suppose I can set something up. As for suspending day-to-day operations, the vice chairman is more fit for that.”

Attention turned to Kyosuke who had his hands intertwined. "Given the gravity, I think it'd be fitting. But I have my doubts all the branches could cooperate, not to mention my unwillingness to inform every one of Mukuro Ikusaba and Junko Enoshima possibly being alive."

“Easy,” said Koichi with a smirk, “we just keep the information of Mukuro Ikusaba confidential. All we need to say is that a division leader was captured by the Despairs. I vote on saving our little savior, heh.”

Gozu huffed in approval. “I agree. If the truth comes out, so be it. We need to focus on rescuing our taken comrade. Nothing less but all our combined efforts will be enough for the notorious Mukuro Ikusaba.”

Juzo scratched his chin. “It’s a little annoying, but I still do owe a debt to her for the Despara Carnival. I can mobilize my guys immediately if need be.”

“I’m full on board too!” yelled Bandai. “We wouldn’t be much of an anti-despair organization if we ran from this.

"I agree to look for Nanami also," said Seiko. "She's a valuable member, and we can't let the Despairs think they can bully us around with brute force.”
After Seiko spoke, everyone glanced at the individual whose decision was uncertain.

Ruruka raised an eyebrow, annoyed. "Oh come on, I still think she's suspicious—but I'm not heartless. She's one of my subordinates and hasn't paid her debt to me. Sonosuke and I are in favor of searching for the gamer dweeb, right babe?" An approving grumble from the blacksmith was heard shortly after.

Kyoko turned to Munakata. “It appears we’ve reached a consensus, Vice Chairman.”

Kyosuke could be seen sweeping the room with his eyes, glancing at all the faces of cooperation. "Yes, it has. Effective immediately, all operations are suspended in favor of searching for Mukuro Ikusaba and Chiaki Nanami."

Miaya smiled from ear to ear. Not only was she happy about the decision, but the sight she was witnessing was a first. This is the first time we all have been so…neighborly.

The therapist was used to bickering and dissonance among her associates, so this display of fellowship inspired lots of confidence. Even she doubted this collection of diverse individuals would ever be unanimously onboard with a matter. If only you can see what effect you’ve had on us, Chiaki. Maybe Yukizome was right after all.

Once Miaya thought of the housekeeper, she realized how odd it was the vocal woman was silent in this important discussion about her savior’s well-being. When she glanced at Chisa, for a second, she saw a bizarre sight.

She saw a faint smile. Not a smile of joy, but one that was twisted. Of course, it lasted a moment and Chisa’s auburn hair hid most of her face.

Even so, Miaya didn’t know what to make of it. Did I imagine that…?

VVV

It was a gray morning as Chiaki awoke from her unpleasant slumber. The gamer was shocked she even managed to fall asleep. Her body ached, and the bleakness of her situation made her wake up in a sour mood. It was like being hit in the face with a bat upon waking up. The bat being an invincible soldier known as Mukuro Ikusaba.
When she looked around, she saw Mukuro in new attire. She was in a black school uniform like the one she described performing her missions in. *Must’ve changed when I was sleeping… She’s as quiet as a phantom…*

Chiaki was intrigued when she saw the freckled girl staring up into the dark sky as if she was waiting for something. Rising to her feet, Chiaki asked, "Is something wrong?"

“… It’s nothing really,” said Mukuro, not looking at the gamer while the wind suddenly picked up. “Only…a bad feeling I have…”
Chapter 33: Save the Most Dangerous Game

The dull hum of wind was heard as Chiaki was being dragged along by Mukuro. Not long after waking, the soldier pulled Chiaki along, claiming it was best to move quickly. The gamer guessed she wanted to beat the oncoming storm—as the dark sky and distant thundering would suggest was on the way.

But that didn't seem like the reason. Ever since the soldier's foreboding words earlier, she had been silently walking. Chiaki figured Mukuro could have some kind of sixth sense that told her danger was close by.

Personally, Chiaki couldn't understand how the soldier knew her way through this forest. The trees were so tall and lush, the pathways weren't straight, and the land was uneven. The gamer could tell it would take little for someone to get lost here. Though, Mukuro was an expert in surviving various environments, so the gamer had faith they weren't lost.

Meanwhile, she stared at the ground during the walk, desperate for any kind of idea or phenomenon that would save her. She already knew what would happen if she tried to fight, and talking with Mukuro didn't get her very far.

There must be something... "Really, Mukuro, why do you want to do this? Don't you want to use the freedom you have to help people who will really care about you? You don't have to let Junko control who you are anymore... Someone as incredible as you can choose whatever future she wants."

Chiaki listened to the dreaded silence as Mukuro didn't so much as turn around. The gamer decided desperate times were desperate measures. She tried to think of a convincing lie.

"Okay, I didn't want to say this...but Naegi once told me he'd really like to meet you again. There's still Kirigiri, but personally—I think you're much cooler and cuter. And I would know since she and I are really close. I even heard her say how strong you were once. So, if we go back, I'm sure you'll get to see him again."

Unsurprisingly, Mukuro didn't buy it. The gamer was disheartened the best fib she could create sounded like high school gossip. It was moments like this she regretted not taking Chisa's advice. I
It was sinking in that she'd have to endure whatever Enigma had in store. Knowing her luck and how the Despairs operate, she'd count herself lucky if being put into some doomsday contraption was all that happened.

And so, Chiaki decided she had nothing to lose by going on the offensive. She knew winning was next to impossible, but there were no better options. No one was coming to save her. She'd attack first, and deal with what whatever came next.

*I'll probably get tortured anyway... Nothing left to lose!* After taking a deep breath, Chiaki put her hand on VEIL. Her plan was to stun Mukuro with the sonic blast before subduing her with an electric charge. Even compared to an average agent, her physical ability was mediocre at best—but it'd have to do.

*Just pretend it's a game. Even low-leveled characters can beat high-leveled ones with the right strategy!* Once she steeled her nerves, she put her hand on VEIL's touchscreen.

The moment she did, Mukuro glanced back at her with an annoyed expression. Chiaki thought her blood had turned cold for a moment. *How did she... Do I still attack...?*

Figuring Mukuro was going to retaliate, Chiaki decided to attack regardless. However, she paused when Mukuro put a hand up—not in a threatening way, but in a way that signaled she meant no harm.

Because of her skepticism, Chiaki lowered her hand. Mukuro took a few steps towards the gamer until they were close enough to whisper. Then Mukuro whispered, "We're being followed."

Chiaki gasped. "What...?" The gamer looked around her and noticed nothing but the many trees of the forest. She was positive she heard or saw no signs of other people on the walk. "I don't see anyone..."

"They're concealing themselves extremely well."

"*They’re? How many of them are there?*"
“Multiple; maybe over seven of them.”

The gamers gasped, floored by that number. It boggled her mind how seven individuals could tail them, and she never noticed a thing. Tailing someone sounded difficult enough when there was just one person.

At first, Chiaki was terrified of what enemies could be lurking behind the trees. And then a thought crossed her mind. Maybe, if her hunch was right, it could be some kind of task force sent to rescue her. Mukuro’s attitude suggested they weren’t someone working with her.

After Chiaki let a smile escape, Mukuro said, "If you're hoping this is the Future Foundation, I wouldn't bet on it. If they were allies of yours, they wouldn't have followed us like this. With their methods, it's akin to a predator hunting. They're no friends of yours or mine."

Chiaki felt her optimism evaporate. “You can tell all that?”

"I can also tell they're highly coordinated. They likely have practice doing this and are very familiar with this terrain. My guess is they hunt humans like a sport."

“It's like a survival game…” Chiaki actually liked that genre, but this was a nightmare. Now she longed for just a few minutes ago where her biggest fear was Mukuro. "I think I remember hearing about a group like that in the Future Foundation. What do we do? Are you going to fight them?"

Mukuro stared into space for a moment. "I'm not completely sure of their capabilities. Also, this would be a bad spot to challenge them. We need to get in a better space."

“Okay.” Chiaki held up her handcuffed arm. “You should undo the cuffs so they won’t get in the way.”

“No.”

The answer was so quick, Chiaki could barely get her next words out. “But…why? Not only could I help, you could fight at full strength.”
"My mission was to deliver you to Enigma alive. Until I do that, I won't release the binds."

Chiaki couldn’t wrap her head around Mukuro’s thinking. Whether it was pride, confidence, or loyalty, the gamer couldn't think of a reason why being handcuffed mattered so much. Perhaps Mukuro thought she'd use the opportunity to run, but if she was right about these hunters—the gamer would forget the circumstances and focus on escaping the forest.

“But what if we die? Right now, we need to focus on surviving.”

Mukuro turned her back and continued walking. “I’ll protect you.”

And just like that, their walk continued. How Mukuro was so calm, Chiaki couldn't fathom. At this moment, there were multiple people watching their every move. If Mukuro was right, they could pounce on them at any given opportunity.

Chiaki was so afraid, she stayed close to Mukuro, nearly sticking to her. The soldier who frightened her was now going to be her bodyguard, supposedly.

The gamer couldn't imagine having problems appearing interesting ever again. Just the past twenty-four hours had been filled with so much insanity, she'd always have a ton of stories to tell. *I miss the old days of just being a gamer girl who never had anything happen…*

Their walk continued for what felt like an hour. Chiaki's constant levels of anxiousness, as she kept peeking over her shoulder, made it feel like days. It felt like walking through an active minefield with a blindfold. She could be walking…then *bang*, she’d be dead.

At last, Mukuro stopped, making Chiaki do the same. The soldier looked at the surroundings, probably sizing up the field. Then Mukuro peered at Chiaki. She whispered, "Be ready."

Chiaki nodded. "I'm ready…but I really do think undoing the handcuffs would be—"

Mukuro cut her off and yelled, “Those of you that are hiding, reveal yourselves!”
The gamer flinched since Mukuro yelled so suddenly. The initial shock became fear. Her eyes darted across the area, looking for any sign of movement. Nothing seemed amiss so far. "Why aren't they revealing themselves?" Chiaki asked.

“There deciding on what to do. It seems they weren’t suspecting I’d catch on to them. They could very well blitz us with their firepower, so don’t be shocked if bullets start flying.”

*Oh dear…* Even after the many years of playing shooter games, Chiaki was not at all confident in her abilities. The most she could do was deflect bullets for a short time. *I should leave this to Mukuro, and protect us if I can.*

“Mukuro, one of VEIL’s features as an electromagnetic shield that can deflect bullets for up to ten seconds. I'll use it if we're in a bad spot...if that's okay with you.”

The freckled girl stared back before grinning. “Yes, that’ll be helpful.”

Smiling, the gamer could feel an odd sense of camaraderie forming. “Guess it was bad luck we landed in a forest with human hunters in it, huh?”

Mukuro’s expression turned serious. “I don’t think so. This doesn't seem like it was just bad luck…It’s as if they knew our location beforehand.”

“How?”

“Somebody could've tipped them off.” Mukuro looked Chiaki up and down. "It seems I might not have been as thorough in searching you for a tracking device as I should have."

Confused, Chiaki didn’t know of any tracking device on her person. “I don’t have a tracking device.” The gamer shuttered a bit. *Unless Ms. Yukizome planted one in my head or something…*

“Heads up,” said Mukuro, “they’re coming.”

Just as Mukuro said, three individuals with guns and dressed in camouflage tactical gear appeared. To Chiaki, it was like they appeared out of nowhere. All three of their figures suggested they were
“There are ten of you…” murmured Mukuro, glancing behind Chiaki.

Once the gamer looked back, she saw the seven extra bodies. They were dressed in the same gear as the three in front of them, and three of them appeared to have the figures of a female. Every one of the hunter's faces were impossible to describe since they all wore military goggles.

*This is impossible to get past, I think*… Chiaki hoped Mukuro was wrong on the numbers and it was only a few. She didn't know how the soldier would face ten fully-armed, experienced individuals.

“Impressive,” said a man in front of them with a deep voice. Chiaki assumed he was the leader. “How long ago did you know we were following?”

“The moment you started. Though, admittedly, I wasn’t sure how many of you there were. You’re very skilled in traversing this forest without making a sound.”

The man laughed. "See, fellas? Isn’t she everything I told you she’d be? I’d expect nothing less from Mukuro Ikusaba, or maybe the Reaper is a better name to use?”

“You know my identity?”

“After that crazy bitch you call a sister messed up the world, people in our profession figured out the invincible soldier’s true identity.”

The freckled girl flicked her hair aside. “I’m currently on a mission to escort this girl to my client. If you are Despairs, you’ll get out of my way.”

“Heh, you think we’re like those crazy, helmet-wearing freak shows? Sorry, but we’re not Despairs.”

*They’re not?* If they weren’t Despairs, Chiaki guessed they must’ve been beneficiaries of The Tragedy. Like Kyosuke explained to her, there were many groups—gangs, criminal organizations,
corrupt businesses—that benefited from the lawlessness, but still didn't claim to be Despairs.

"It's as I thought," said Mukuro. "I'm guessing you're all former military. When the Tragedy began, you all banded together and decided to become hunters. Only, your prey is humans who you take and release into some type of environment or facility. Then you make a sport of it by hunting them. Am I right?"

“Damn, you are good. I take it you’ve heard of us?”

“A little, but since you’ve heard of me…I think you know what that means. I assure you everything you’ve heard about my reputation is true. I don’t care about you hunting humans, but if you get in my way—there will be trouble.”

Despite Mukuro's threat, the man chuckled. “No can do, Ikusaba. You see, we have a vested interest in you.”

"I see; then could you tell me who told you my location?"

“An experienced soldier like you should know that’s a question you ask after you’ve won.”

“That’s going to be impossible… I’m not leaving any of you alive.”

Mukuro was on her side, but Chiaki was fearful. When she saw none of the hunters back down, it reminded her of how out of place she was. She was surrounded by lethal human beings while the gamer had only ever killed in a digital format.

“We’re not afraid of the Reaper. Quite the opposite, actually. Normal humans can be boring to hunt. Their actions are predictable, and very few do anything interesting. You, however, are a whole different animal... Having prey like you will provide the greatest hunt we could ever hope for."

“You seem to be confused… I’m not the prey here. All this game will be is a survival challenge to see which of you dies last.”
The man's crooked teeth could be seen after he smiled. "Oh, this is going to be fun. Now, we're going to disperse into this forest. You're welcome to chase us, run, or whatever. I'm sure what you'll do will be exciting, Mukuro Ikusaba."

With that, the hunters vanished behind the bushes, off to do whatever they did during a hunt. Chiaki thought Mukuro would chase them, but the soldier wasn’t moving.

Chiaki’s heart began pounding harder and harder. She was in a real survival game, with her being the target. "I can't believe we're being hunted…"

"I'm their trophy kill, so they'll be aiming at me. Besides, I'm beginning to think someone you know may have pointed them to our location."

Someone I know? Chiaki didn’t know who Mukuro was talking about. Well…except for the person who always had something to do with whatever insanity that surrounded her. Ms. Yukizome, please tell me even you wouldn’t be crazy enough to try this… The gamer could feel dread building up when she knew the answer to her own inner plea.

Focusing on the task at hand, Chiaki asked, “Are you really sure you want the handcuffs to stay on? I don't want to be a burden…”

“The chain is long enough to allow for some flexibility. Just move as I do, listen to whatever I say, and use your common sense.” Mukuro grabbed her handgun. “Remember, a group like this won’t care about killing you, even if they were put up to this.”

“O-okay… So, how are you going to do this exactly? Are you going to transform into your super soldier form and take them out?”

Mukuro smirked after Chiaki’s comment. “Truthfully, I’m unprepared for this. The only weapon I have is my knife and this gun, which has seven rounds in it.”

It didn’t take a mathematician to realize there were more hunters than Mukuro had bullets. “What are you going to do?”

“They won’t come at us all at once. I’ll use that opportunity to pick them off one at a time, and then I’ll take whatever weapons they have on them.” Mukuro looked at Chiaki, her eyes signaling
she was in full soldier-mode. “Stay close, and keep your footsteps light.”

“Alright.” Chiaki internally thanked Chisa for showing her how to move quietly.

Mukuro jogged through the forest, her eyes unblinking. Chiaki tried her best to keep up while holding a finger on VEIL, ready to activate her barrier at a moment’s notice.

The more Chiaki observed, the more she noticed how truly dense the forest was. The plants were lush and overgrown, it rose and fell on a dime, plus it was easy to slip or trip.

While the gamer was glad they'd have a lot of cover, it worked as a double-edged sword. At any given moment, a hunter could be hiding behind a bush or a tree. If their earlier stealth proved anything, it was that they were masters at camouflage.

But Chiaki had the greatest cheat code to this kind of game, which was the former Ultimate Soldier herself.

*Junko herself is bad enough, but with her sister by her side… No wonder these two caused such damage. The only person I think could beat them is Kamakura; still, that's not really—*

“Get down!” yelled Mukuro, hitting the ground before Chiaki followed suit.

Chiaki could hear the bullets whiz over her head before Mukuro fired twice. With her ears ringing, the gamer put her hand on VEIL’s touchscreen to activate the barrier. Before she could, Mukuro put a hand on her arm.

“There’s no need,” Mukuro said.

Chiaki was confused as Mukuro rose. After Chiaki did the same, the soldier led her to where the hunter who fired at them. Chiaki grimaced when his open eyes stared at space, his head having a hole in it.

Mukuro bent down and took his gun and said, “That’s one.” Then she turned her body quick enough to make Chiaki flinch.
“Now what?”

Instead of an answer, Mukuro led her to a spot behind the bushes, across from the dead body. The soldier stared with unwavering focus as if she was waiting. Chiaki could've asked, but she felt silence was what Mukuro wanted.

“Oh hell,” said an approaching male voice. It turned out to be two hunters who approached the man Mukuro just killed.

The other hunter laughed in a light voice, indicating it was a female. "What an idiot. Did he really think this kind of approach would work on Ikusaba?"

Mukuro bent towards Chiaki and whispered, “We’re going to use the chain and stun them. Make sure to match my arm’s height.”

Chiaki nodded, even though that sounded terrifying. If she messed up, both of them were dead. Nonetheless, there was no choice and Mukuro was the expert.

The man bent down to examine the body. "Headshot. Dumbass didn't even know it was coming. Ikusaba must've run in the—"

Jumping from behind the bushes, Mukuro ran at them with Chiaki following. The two hunters turned to see them and began to reach for their guns, but they couldn't recover. The chain hit them in the neck as Mukuro and Chiaki ran passed them. Then Chiaki looked away, as Mukuro fired twice, killing them both.

“That’s three,” said Mukuro, checking the bodies.

… She’s incredible. Chiaki didn’t admire the art of murder, but she couldn’t help being impressed by the soldier skill. In almost no time, she dispatched three trained killers with a weak gamer handcuffed to her. She even found a way to use the handcuffs to her advantage.

It was conflicting because while this did mean they could escape this survival game and get out of the forest, there was still the issue with Enigma. Chiaki silently hoped them working together like
this sparked a friendship between the two… Though, she wasn't confident.

“Let’s move,” said Mukuro.

The mismatched duo moved through the forest once more. Chiaki was put-off by how Mukuro was carrying on after killing three people. But this was probably just another day at the office for her.

“Look out!” yelled Mukuro, shoving Chiaki behind a tree while she followed.

Not a second after, bullets started raining down where they previously stood. Chiaki gulped, realizing if Mukuro was a bit slower, they’d be Swiss cheese. “Thanks, Mukuro.”

The soldier nodded at her before turning her attention to the spot the shooter targeted. “Based on that location…” Mukuro gripped her gun, not moving.

And then she spun from behind the tree and fired twice. After that, Chiaki heard what sounded like a large branch from a tree dropping to the ground. The gamer felt confident in her guess of what that was. She can even hit targets that high up…

Mukuro scrambled back to cover after more bullets began coming. “Damn, I didn't think they’d swarm like they are. They’re intent on pinning us down now. I count three of them.”

“How are you going to handle this one?”

The soldier bit her lip before turning to Chiaki. "Your VEIL device: how long can it maintain that barrier?"

“Izayoi’s instructions said it can last ten seconds.”

“Are you sure? If you're off, it can compromise this.”

Truth be told, Chiaki had never used it for that long. Even at the Despara Carnival, the performance enhancer made her good enough to barely need it. But she said, “I’m sure. Izayoi may
be Ando’s toy, but he’s the best at making weapons.”

“In that case, I want you to use the barrier while I take out those three.”

“Is ten seconds enough time for you to—” Mukuro raised an eyebrow, a gesture Chiaki understood. She herself realized what the answer to her question was after hearing and witnessing the soldier’s feats. “Okay, I’m ready when you are.”

The gunfire continued to come their way. Chiaki doubted she’d be able to hear correctly for a while because of her ringing ears.

Finally, the gunfire subsided for a moment. Mukuro yelled, “Now!”

Summoning all her courage, Chiaki pressed the combination on VEIL’s touchscreen, bringing forth the barrier. She ran from behind the tree, causing the hunters to start firing again. She smiled as none of the bullets got through. Doing Ando’s bidding sucks, but I really am happy I got VEIL!

Mukuro used Chiaki for cover as she returned fire. In no time, she got one of them in the head.

*Seven seconds left*, thought Chiaki.

The gamer made sure to cover Mukuro were she went, and—more importantly—to keep her arm up. The second hunter was proving hard to hit, but Mukuro got her in the neck.

The last hunter was playing it safer, likely because he was frightened by witnessing his fellow hunters fall. He decided to take cover and blind fire. Mukuro decided to circle around and shoot him before he knew she was there. Chiaki took a deep breath, thankful the soldier made it in time.

“And now,” said Mukuro reloading, “there are only three—”

Mukuro pushed Chiaki to the ground. At first, Chiaki was stunned…until she saw the blade fly over her head that would've connected if Mukuro hadn't pushed her out of harm's way. Unfortunately, it came at a price as the assailant cut Mukuro on the arm with his hunting knife.
The wound caused Mukuro to stagger for a moment before pulling out her Fenrir knife and engaging the man. The hunter was fast, but the soldier easily disarmed him before slashing her knife across his throat.

Chiaki looked away as the hunter’s body hit the ground, grasping at his neck before he stopped moving. Making sure not to look at the dead body, Chiaki went to check on Mukuro. “Are you okay?”

“It’s just a scratch.” The soldier ripped a piece of cloth from her jacket before tying it over the wound. “It’s nothing to worry about. Now only two of them remain.”

“Yeah, but…” The gamer hesitated, not knowing if what she was about to say was smart.

The incredible feat of Mukuro never being injured during a battle was well known. Of course, there was the instance of Kyosuke scratching her, but Chiaki chalked that up to the vice chairman being exceptional. But it was obvious the reason Mukuro was injured a moment ago was that she protected Chiaki.

Mukuro, who saw Chiaki looking at her worried-like, said, “Seriously, this wound isn’t a big deal.”

“This isn’t the way you fight.” Chiaki could practically see the question mark above Mukuro’s head. “What I mean is…you’re more used to being alone and watching your own back. I’m… really making this hard for you, aren’t I?”

Mukuro glanced indifferently at her before checking the dead hunter's body. "I've done safeguard missions before. I got injured because I dropped my guard. We've gotten through this game with tricks and my experience. Anyone less would've been long dead by now."

Chiaki was still doubtful, but Mukuro began to advance—so she dropped it and followed. Despite her worries, it didn't change how they only had two more hunters to go through. We’re almost done. Then I can…go see Enigma. It's like a game with only bad endings…

Thunder could be heard in the distance, as it had been through this hectic day. The duo walked through the forest, partaking in the odd peace that had ensued. After that last clash, there hadn't been an attack.
“Do you think the last two gave up?” asked Chiaki.

“Not likely.”

“We haven't seen anybody in a while. They saw you were too good and they couldn't win, maybe.”

“The hunters left is that woman and their leader, that man you saw at the front. I can tell: he's not running away. I’m guessing he’s lying in wait for me just ahead, ready to challenge me instead of staging an ambush.”

Chiaki pushed branches out of her way. The congested path they were on made it hard to see ahead. “Do you think you’ll be able to beat him?”

“Well,” said Mukuro, pausing for a moment before walking through some large foliage, “we’re about to see.”

Once Chiaki walked through the foliage, she was surprised to see the forest open up into a large clearing. And over twenty meters from them stood the hunter's leader, smirking once he laid eyes on the freckled girl. Chiaki stood close to Mukuro, ready for any gunfire that might come.

“You’ve made it, Mukuro Ikusaba.”

“Your comrades are dead. It’s just you and another left.”

“That’s as expected. I honestly didn’t believe any of those schmucks would stop you, even with that helpless little girl next to you.”

*Little girl,* thought Chiaki, puffing her cheeks. *I’m older than Mukuro.*

“You knew they were no match for me, yet you didn’t assist them. It seems my first judgment of you was correct. You’ve even abandoned this hunt and decided to face me.”
“That I did. Hunters are replaceable; however, it's not every day someone of your reputation falls into my lap.” The man drew a machete. "I always wanted to fight a soldier of Fenrir."

Grinning, Mukuro responded by drawing her Fenrir knife. “You get to die by one.”

Chiaki used this opportunity to whisper an idea she had. “I know how you feel about one-on-one fights, but I could stun him with VEIL’s sonic blast. And there’s also the chance of the last hunter getting involved…”

The gamer thought Mukuro would refuse until she said, “Yes, you’re correct. I’ll give you the signal when the time is right.”

Chiaki smiled, glad the soldier agreed to her proposition.

"I'll be moving a lot, try and stay close so the handcuffs don't impede me." Once Chiaki nodded, Mukuro faced the lead hunter again. “Ready?”

Choosing not to answer, the hunter ran at Mukuro, machete raised above his head. Mukuro immediately side-stepped before slashing at him. He parried it easily and began swiping at Mukuro rapidly. It was clear his skill was better than the previous hunters.

Meanwhile, Chiaki did her best to maneuver herself so Mukuro could move well. As it was, the handcuffs likely kept her from performing at her top level. It was hard to tell though since she still looked as graceful as ever.

“Amazing!” yelled the hunter. “You attack without even thinking about it. Looks like all the myths about you weren’t a lie!”

The soldier kept on the offensive. Watching someone as small as her contend with the hunter, who was much larger and muscular in size, was impressive. It was like a wolf battling a tiger.

Chiaki shook her head, realizing she was getting too into the fight. She kept her fingers on VEIL’s touchscreen, ready at any moment to stun the hunter. She didn't even want to think about if she hit Mukuro by accident, though she was confident the soldier would still win somehow.
Mukuro and the hunter were exchanging blows, their weapons clashing over and over. And then Mukuro backed away swiftly before staring at Chiaki, her eyes wide.

*The signal!* Right when Chiaki was about to use VEIL, something stopped her.

Something poked her in the back, and then her legs felt like they had turned to jelly. She fell to the ground roughly, completely paralyzed. "Wha...what happened to me...?"

"Looks like the girl got caught by my fellow hunter," said the man, smiling widely. "Now she's dead weight, Ikusaba."

Chiaki struggled to move her eyes to look at the person standing above her. It was the female hunter who had finally revealed herself. Chiaki realized she must've shot her with some kind of tranquilizer, rending her useless.

She turned her eyes to Mukuro, a disgruntled look on her face. Even the soldier lost her composure. Now her movements were severely handicapped, and she was outnumbered in an open area.

"You were too cocky," said the male hunter. "Not freeing yourself and confronting me in this open area with your knife. It seems"—the hunter was about to swing his machete—"you underestimated me!"

The following events happened within seconds. Mukuro backed away, avoiding being cut, but she couldn't evade how she wanted because Chiaki was immobile. Next, the soldier turned and pulled her gun out, towards the female hunter above Chiaki. Right when the female hunter was going to fire, Mukuro fired quicker, shooting her in the head.

But now she was defenseless from the male hunter that swiped at her again.

Chiaki never thought she'd hear Mukuro scream in pain, but it happened. The soldier fell to the ground, the knife falling out of her hand as she touched her eyes...or what was left of them.

The soldier had apparently been cut across the eyes, blinding her. She was breathing hard, undoubtedly in an immense amount of pain.
The hunter laughed loudly. “So much for the Reaper.” Then he winked at Chiaki. “Couldn’t have done it without help from your friend down there.”

Oh no… Mukuro can’t see now… Chiaki tried her best to move, but her body still refused to respond. Feelings of helplessness began to strangle her.

The hunter approached Mukuro while looking extremely confident. His opponent had been blinded. He raised his machete and quickly brought it down towards Mukuro.

Chiaki thought the soldier’s death would come next…but that didn’t happen. Somehow, Mukuro evaded the swipe.

From his expression, Chiaki knew the hunter was as shocked as she was. How did she do that?

The hunter tried once more, only for Mukuro to dodge. Clearly frustrated, he kept trying. Not only was Mukuro evading, she was beginning to counterattack. After a dodge, she’d give him a quick jab or a kick. Incredibly, even without vision or a wide area of movement, she was in control.

A smiled cracked over the hunter's face, as Mukuro had stumbled because of the handcuffs impeding her. Chiaki had a feeling she wouldn't evade unscathed this time.

I have to move… Chiaki tried her best to push off the ground and actually felt herself squirm. Move! She didn't know how, but she managed to push herself toward Mukuro a few feet, allowing the soldier to evade.

“How!” yelled the hunter.

Mukuro used the opportunity to injure the hunter in his eye with her thumb. He swore loudly before backing away. “Now we’re almost even,” she said. “I’ll take the other next.”

“Damn you…” the hunter glared at Chiaki. “Moving after that amount of time is impossible!”
Chiaki wasn't sure how she pulled it off either. Then she remembered what Chisa told her in the bar about her body being more naturally resilient. Is that what helped me? It's all I can think of...

“I’ve got another game.” The hunter pulled out his gun and aimed at Chiaki. “Let’s see how good you are when that girl becomes literal dead weight!”

I have to reach VEIL! While she could move some, her hand wouldn’t get there fast enough. The gamer felt an intense despair. She was helpless to defend herself. No... I can’t—

Once Chiaki heard the gunshot, it felt as if her heart stopped. She was sure death would come next.

However, the darkness didn’t come. The most shocking thing the entire day occurred in front of her: Mukuro shielded her before the bullet could arrive.

And then the soldier shouted, “There!” She threw her knife at the hunter, striking him right in the neck.

“S... shi...” The hunter collapsed on the ground, becoming motionless.

Mukuro gasped before falling to the ground.

"Mukuro!” yelled Chiaki, trying to move. It was frustrating having to squirm and crawl to the soldier since her legs still weren’t reliable enough, but she was mostly concerned for Mukuro.

“Looks like I was too careless,” said Mukuro, holding the bleeding gunshot wound around her gut. “I even allowed a vital area to be hit…”

“Mukuro…” Managing to hold herself up, Chiaki looked down at Mukuro feeling nothing but sorrow. Right now, she wasn’t the feared soldier, but a person who saved her life. “Why did you do that…? You could’ve killed him while he was busy with me, couldn’t you…”

Mukuro took a few pained breaths. “My mission was to get you to the destination alive. If you died, it would’ve been a failure. I was just doing my job.”
Chiaki looked down at the handcuffs and realized something. "The reason you wouldn't take them off was that... you wanted to protect me in case this happened..."

Mukuro didn’t answer as she looked into the gray sky, her eyes looking weak.

"Tell me what to do... Tell me what to do so I can save you, please..."

"That's..." Mukuro's voice trailed off. Her eyes widened when water fell on her face.

Chiaki thought it was rain, but then she realized it was her own tears. She hadn't noticed that her tears began falling. Wiping them, she said, "Sorry."

"... Why are you crying?"

"Because this isn't fair..." Chiaki shook her head. "Just tell me how to save you. I survived being impaled like a dozen times... This should be easy for someone as strong as you."

Mukuro still looked confused. "The bullet hit a vital area and probably caused more damage. I can barely walk, and even if I could, the help necessary is too far away. It's pointless to try. It's over for me..." The freckled girl gazed at Chiaki. "I've never had anyone cry over me... You could do such a thing after everything that happened?"

"I know what happened but, you saved me and I... Your life matters too..."

The soldier gasped before she closed her eyes and smiled. "Heh, Junko really was correct about you. I think I finally understand why she had such an interest in you unlike she's taken in anyone else."

"I don’t understand..."

Mukuro reached inside her uniform and pulled out a small key. Grabbing Chiaki’s wrist, she unlocked the handcuffs. The gamer felt instant relief around her wrist.
“Go,” said Mukuro. "I can no longer continue, and you're still wanted alive. This is all I can do."
The soldier pointed in a direction. "The exit is that way."

Chiaki looked down at Mukuro before wiping her eyes again. "I'm going to get help and come back for you. Then you can atone for your crimes and find a future of your own, not something Junko or anyone decided for you. So...promise me you won't die..."

“But that's not—" Mukuro stopped, looking at the sky. Then she gazed at Chiaki again and smiled warmly. "I promise. You better hurry, Chiaki... There are dark clouds on the horizon..."

Nodding, Chiaki stood up. Then the gamer ran in the direction Mukuro pointed. She didn’t look back once. Instead, she focused on running as fast as she could.

A light rain had started while Chiaki was running. She was beginning to think she might've taken a wrong turn somewhere. It felt like she had been sprinting through the forest for hours.

Even so, she didn’t stop, thinking of Mukuro who’d was waiting patiently for her to return. She didn’t stop and realize she was trying so hard for someone who helped ruin her life and killed innocents. She just wanted to save her. She didn’t want her to die.

She fell a few times, scraped herself on some thorns, but at last—she saw the area open up into a wide field. She saw a dirt path that was probably a road. Also, she saw someone's car parked on the dirt path. What's more, the owner was leaning on the front of it, smiling and humming.

Chiaki wasn't shocked...because she was never shocked when the person she saw appeared anymore.

“... Ms. Yukizome,” murmured Chiaki.

“You've made it out, my little savior." Chisa looked at her from the side of her eyes. "Looks like you've seen better days, hehe."
Light raindrops fell from overhead, as Chiaki stood parallel to her former teacher. The housekeeper smiled at her casually, as if she was picking her up from school. Chiaki’s temper was rising because this confirmed what she suspected all along, which was those hunters was sent by her.

“Do you know how worried I’ve been, young lady?” said Chisa. “But thankfully, you’re here and unharmed.” Chisa spread her arms. “Come give your favorite person a hug.”

While she continued to glare daggers at her, Chiaki approached the housekeeper. Once she was close enough, the gamer activated VEIL and swung her electric-charged hand at her. At this moment, she didn’t fear or empathize with Chisa’s condition. She just wanted to hit her one time.

The housekeeper ducked before she said, “Ha-ha, someone’s testy!”

Chiaki swung again, only to miss before Chisa grabbed her arm and pulled before slamming the side of her face on the wet hood of the car. The gamer let out a squeal when she felt the housekeeper twist her arm, effectively rending her immobile.

The housekeeper giggled. “While I understand your emotions are high now, I’m asking you to please not do that again. The last thing we need is for one of us to do something we’ll regret.”

“You sent those hunters after me,” said Chiaki.

“Wrong. I sent those hunters to save you. I told them your location and let them take care of the rest. You’re welcome.”

“One of them tried to kill me! How did you even know where we were?”

“Come now, silly. Have you really not figured it out yet? That choker around your neck not only lets me track your location, it also lets me listen to whatever you're saying at the time. Oh, and I can detonate it anytime I want.”
Chiaki was taken aback, but not shocked. She figured the choker was some kind of surveillance device. Hearing Chisa could detonate it at any time was frightening, though. All the times she could’ve chosen to be insubordinate might’ve been her end.

“I know sending the hunters was extreme, but it was the best way to stop Ikusaba. Just like always, I had your best interest at heart.”

“… You’re a liar. If you knew my location, you could’ve just sent the Future Foundation. But you wouldn’t do that because it’d make you look suspicious, putting you at risk. You don’t care about this savior thing or the Future Foundation… You only care about yourself.”

It was a mystery what expression Chisa was making since Chiaki’s face was still planted on the car. Insulting someone that could literally make your head explode was unwise, but the gamer couldn’t calm herself.

“You can call it whatever you like, but I made a gamble. My gamble was thinking that in a forest full of over a dozen killers, you’d be the one to walk out alive—and so you have. Don’t forget if it wasn’t for me, you’d be in a much worse place right now.” Chisa released her arm, causing the gamer to hold it until the pain faded. “Now let’s go; a storm is approaching.”

“No…we can’t leave yet.”

“And why not? Don’t tell me you dropped your game somewhere back there.”

“That’s not it…” Chiaki didn’t know how to say what she wanted to, or if it was smart to say. She wanted to return and rescue the girl who lobotomized her teacher. There was no way the housekeeper would go for that. On the off chance she did, it’d be to kill Mukuro herself probably. *I promised her…*

Chisa looked intrigued, likely because of the worried face the gamer wore. “Geez, if you’re that upset, I’ll buy you a new one when—”

“I need to go back and help Mukuro…” She spoke quickly and in a hushed tone, so Chisa might not have heard her.
But then Chisa broke into laughter, grabbing her sides and leaning on the car. What she was laughing about was unknown, but it certainly amused her since she continued for nearly a minute. After she stopped, Chisa said, “I knew it. Old habits die hard I suppose.”

“What habit?”

“I knew you and Mukuro would bond. And with you being the simple optimistic you are and Mukuro being an emotionally deprived dog…well, it wasn’t hard to see what could happen. Still, actually hearing you say it was more than I could handle, hehe.”

Frowning, Chiaki said, “Then let’s go back and get her. She was in bad shape, but if we hurry and —”

“Do you hear yourself right now?” said Chisa, her smile vanishing. “Why would you want to save her life?”

Chiaki stared at the wet grass. “Because…because she saved my life back there. Without her, I wouldn’t have made it out, and she ended up getting fatally injured because of it. That’s why…I promised I’d come back and save her.”

“And why do you think Ikusaba saved your life?”

“I think it’s because I listened and understood her. For so long, she thought only Junko could, but when we talked—we were able to connect. I think—I know—Mukuro considers me her friend. And, I don’t want to fail my friend like I failed before…”

Chisa placed a hand over her face with a look of exasperation. “I always believed your optimism was one facet that makes you the savior, but you always had some degree of sense with it. That degree of sense kept you from becoming a bleeding-heart fool look Naegi. As I listen to you now, I don’t hear any sense—just raw emotion.”

Chiaki frowned before turning her back on Chisa and walking towards the forest. “If you’re just going to make fun of me, I’m going back for Mukuro.”

“My goodness, you're referring to her so formally. I can’t get you to do that with me.”
Chiaki continued her approach to the forest until she felt Chisa’s hand wrap around her arm. It wasn’t the same painful technique she used to immobilize her before, rather just a simple grab. She glanced over her shoulder to see a rare sympathetic look from Chisa, her auburn hair sticking to her face because of the rain.

“Ikusaba saved you because it was her mission. If her goal was your death, you’d be dead and she wouldn’t have hesitated. Do you believe she would’ve let you go if those hunters had not intercepted her?”

“But she protected me, and the smile she had… I know you think it’s dumb, but I could tell by looking at her. She wanted to find a future for herself that didn’t involve Junko. And I can give her that chance.”

“Chiaki, remember what I told you the day we met? I said your talent could be useful for making friends if you put the effort into it. You’re wonderful at doing that, but you have to realize friendship isn’t always the answer. All the people she’s killed, our classmates, what she did to me… Can you look into the eyes of someone who’s done the things she has, willingly, and call them a friend?”

“I… she didn’t…” No rebuttal came from Chiaki’s mouth because she had none. Her mind was a flurry of chaos. One side would recall how Mukuro saved her, the other would imagine Chisa when she was being lobotomized, and everything else was jumbled into a confusing mess.

“What would you do if Kitta, or one of Junko’s successors, or Junko Enoshima herself was standing in front of you? Despite everything, would you help them after hearing a sob story and witnessing an unselfish act?”

“I…don’t know…”

“You have a kind heart, my dear, but you’ve yet to develop a perspective when it comes to not choosing hope or despair. Mukuro Ikusaba is not someone you need to be saving, or should want to.” Chisa released her arm. “Let’s go, Chiaki.”

Chisa’s heels collided against the wet grass as she walked to the car. Chiaki, however, still had not moved. The gamer didn’t know how to refute Chisa but leaving felt like the wrong thing to do.
Chisa stopped walking and sighed. “I’m being extremely patient, you know? Just think about what will happen. We’ll save Mukuro and then she’ll be put to death after being interrogated: end of story. Not to mention you showing her camaraderie will be a big red flag to those in the organization who suspect you. This is a lose-lose in every aspect. You have no answer to—”

“I know… I know you’re right. But still, it’s not fair…”

“I would think you of all people would know how unfair life can be.”

Chiaki turned around, faced the housekeeper. “She had to endure Junko’s influence since day one. You know how Junko is, Ms. Yukizome. Not even a day, and look what she did to our entire class. Mukuro went through it all her life…and I still think she’s able to change. If we convince Mukuro to help us, it’d be proof Junko’s influence isn’t irreversible.”

Chisa smirked. “Ah, so that’s it. I was so focused on your pureness, I didn’t look at it from that angle.”

“Now what are you talking about?”

“While I’m sure you want to help Ikusaba…that’s only part of the reason. Another part of you is clamoring, desperately, for any chance to show-up Junko Enoshima. That crazy bitch isn’t here, so this is the best way you can do that.”

That can’t be… “You’re wrong. This has nothing to do with revenge our ulterior motives. I’m not like you.”

“Hehe, I’m sure Gekkogahara could say this more elegantly: you’re projecting all your hate, pain, and resentment for Junko into her sister. It’s become like an achievement in a game for you. By liberating Ikusaba of Junko’s will, you’ve done what you never could have—which is defeat Junko. The same euphoric feeling came to you upon defeating Takara, did it not?”

Chiaki wished the housekeeper would stop talking. With every word, she became more irritated. And she was irritated…since there was some truth to what she was saying.

“It’s like I told you: just as you left a mark on her, she has left one on you as well.”
But, even if that's true… “I still want to save her Ms. Yukizome.”

Chisa put a hand on her hip, gazing into the heavens for a moment before locking eyes with Chiaki. “Even that wasn’t enough to convince you. Alright, how about the fact Ikusaba accepted her death. She let you go, meaning she didn’t have the strength to move. The Ultimate Soldier, knowing her own body, already knows she’s dead. There, satisfied now?”

“I… I can’t just leave…”

“Let’s go. This conversation is over.”

Chiaki’s temper reached a boiling point it hadn’t for a long time. Everything from her almost dying, being unable to help Mukuro, and her inability to counter Chisa was catching up with her. And there was only one person she wanted to throw it at.

“So, I should just go back to being your puppet in the Future Foundation until you decide to kill me! Even after everything you’ve done, I’ve never given up on you. But now… I don’t see a difference between you and Junko since you both—”

She had her eyes closed, her head facing downward, and she was screaming. Because she was doing these three things, she didn’t notice Chisa approach before the housekeeper racked her hand across her face. Chiaki winced, sure that a red mark had appeared on her face.

With cold eyes, Chisa said, “I’m not going to ask again.”

There was no arguing with her at this point. If she didn’t comply, Chisa would do something to her. She’d have no choice but to leave Mukuro, alone in the rain as she died. Her anger was replaced with sorrow realizing her promise would go unkept.

Chiaki began her walk of shame to the car, refusing to meet her former teachers in the eye. The patter of rain on her head stopped as she got in. After Chisa joined her, the duo made their way along the dirt trail.

Chiaki kept her eyes on the forest as it got farther away, images of nothing but the freckled soldier
in her mind. I’m sorry…

VVV

Mukuro’s breathing had become weaker. She could barely move a finger, and sitting upright was a challenge. Her body began to feel cold, and conscious was becoming fleeting. She only had blurry sight out of her right eye while there was nothing in her left. They were all signs of something she knew was imminent.

Yet, she couldn’t help but smile because of what she imagined. She thought of Chiaki’s coming to rescue her with an earnest expression. It was just entertainment before the end, but she shook her head before she actually hoped for that to happen.

*There’s no way she’ll find help in time.* Mukuro laughed. *Though, knowing her—even if it meant I’d kidnap her again—she’d probably try to save me anyway. She really is like him*… She shuffled a bit, regretting it when pain erupted from her wound. Instead, she listened to the sound of the rain, which had picked up.

*Sor**y, Junko… It seems this is as far as my talent let me go. If you were here, you’d say how disgusting I look right now, heh.*

Mukuro was unsure why, but she remembered a talk she had with her sister before Hope’s Peak Academy fell.

VVV

“Ah, feels go to be back,” said Junko, overlooking the campus from a rooftop with Mukuro by her side. She had just gotten done with her amnesia experiment where she took on the persona of Ryoko Otonashi. “Knowing all the cringy crap I did when I was that airhead is filling me with despair.”

Mukuro cheeks glowed. “I thought it was kind of endearing. And it was interesting seeing what you’d be like if you were a blank slate.”

“Yeah, I’d be another boring human succumbing to her base desires and leading a fulfilling life of unhappiness. No doubt Yasuke would’ve preferred that…” She paused for a moment. “Like I’d
want to be a nobody like Nanami.”

Junko had a far-off look Mukuro hadn’t witnessed since they were young. She didn’t know if it was the best time to ask, but Mukuro said, “Junko if you don’t mind, there’s something odd I noticed.”

“What, did you look in a mirror? You’re certainly odd in so many different ways.”

“It’s about how you handled the seventy-seventh class. The more I think about it, the more I’m confused as to why you didn’t make Nanami a Despair as well. Also, you never let me look for her body or question any of her classmates about it. And not only that…” Mukuro trailed off when she saw Junko’s annoyed expression.

“Well, spit it out.”

“… You act differently whenever I bring her up. I know you said there was no grudge between you two…but I was wondering if you could explain your feelings towards her.”

Instead of an answer, Junko gazed at the campus below. Despite the chaotic atmosphere, it was rather peaceful at the moment with the clouds flowing by gently like a canoe on a lake. According to Junko, that’d be changing very soon.

Is she not going to answer? thought Mukuro.

“She had an…odd form of hope I’ve never seen before. It pissed me off.”

“You mean, like the way you talk about Naegi?”

“No…not like that. Her ‘hope’ is different from the dweeb. She had the make-up of someone more in between. She’s some fully accepting of not having a set path or a purpose. She’s someone that just…lives. It’s like a piece of trash floating through a river with hope and despair bordering on both sides.”

Mukuro titled her head, somehow more confused than she was before. “I don’t really understand,
“That’s to be expected, you eyesore. If I can’t wrap my beautiful head around it, you don’t have a chance.”

Mukuro gasped. “You don’t understand something? I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Well, looks like pigs can fly because I can figure her out, and it ticks me off. And worse, I’m even more pissed off because I don’t know why it pisses me off. Someone like her should be an afterthought, yet I don’t remember something getting my attention like this since I first learned about despair…”

“If you have such an interest, why did you choose to kill her?”

“My better judgment was telling me to.”

“Then should we search for her body to confirm her death? I doubt she’s alive after what you did, but I’ve seen crazier things happen on the battlefield before. Just give me the order, Junko, and I’ll scour the entire campus for any clues.”

Junko remained silent for a moment before she said, “Not necessary. I already know what happened to her. No clue if she’s dead or not, though.”

“Should we check it out?”

“Nope.”

Mukuro scratched her head, beginning to feel as if Junko was speaking a different language. Her sister had felt Chiaki was a danger because her hope was different, thus she decided to kill her. Although, while she possibly might be alive, Junko choose not to act. Her sister could be very erratic, but there was always some reason for what she did.

“But, if Nanami is alive and could be dangerous to you—” Junko reached out and grabbed Mukuro’s tongue, stopping her sentence. She could’ve evaded, but decide not to since Junko
wasn’t trying to kill her this time.

“Tch, bite your tongue. I said she was odd and my better judgment told me to kill her at the time. I never said anything about being afraid of the nobody.”

Junko released her tongue. Mukuro grimaced while she said, “Sorry. What I meant was, if you wanted her dead, then why so uncaring about it now? I know how prudent you are when it comes to loose ends…”

“Easy, I changed my mind. I found it’s in my better interest I do nothing and let whatever happens to her play out.” I wide smile spread across her face. “It’s more fun that way.”

Junko clearly had her mind made up. The fashionista was always proven right in the end, so Mukuro accepted her choice—even though she still didn’t understand what Junko saw in Chiaki Nanami. From what little Mukuro saw of her on campus, she looked lackadaisical and bland.

“Take a good look, my embarrassing sister.” The fashionista stood wide, overlooking the campus with a hungry expression. “It’s the calm before the storm. Very soon, the tornado of despair will raze Hope’s Peak Academy—and the entire world!”

Mukuro smiled. “Right, Junko.”

VVV

At the time, Mukuro didn’t understand what Junko meant when she described Chiaki, nor her reaction to hearing her name.

But after what she went through with the gamer, Mukuro got it. She understood what Junko meant by Chiaki’s hope being odd, her vague description of the gamer, and why Junko would take an interest.

What’s more, she understood her sister more. If her assertion was correct, Mukuro knew why Junko couldn’t fully understand Chiaki or her feelings towards the matter. It all came together in her mind, the correlation between the two vastly different people.
So, Junko, that’s what you meant, huh? Heh, I only wish I could’ve figured it out sooner. Maybe if I understood you this well in the past, we could’ve had a different life… Although, now that I think about it, maybe there was nothing I could do for you…

The rainfall picked up, the water seeping through the leaves of the tree on to Mukuro. The soldier could feel conscious slipping away, and she knew what would happen if she succumbed to it. The soldier was aware it’d be her final slumber.

I don’t have much longer… As expected for a person near death, the faces of those she held dear popped into her head along with the kind moments she shared with them. The moments of levity with her parents and sensei, the smiles she had gotten from Makoto and Chiaki, and of course—the radiant face of her sister staring back at her.

I am a soldier, she kept telling herself. One time, Falcon likened death to a double-edged sword. If you were skilled enough, it would cut down everything in your path. But, one day, that same blade may cut the owner. Mukuro almost laughed at the irony of the girl known as the Reaper about to be cut by death.

From day one, Flacon told her not to be afraid of death—to expected to come at any moment and be grateful it hadn’t. Mukuro never feared death. Why would she when the happiness of her sister was at stake? As long as it was for Junko, she had no problem giving up her life.

So, she was shocked when the liquid running down her face wasn’t the rain.

Huh? she said, using the little strength she had to touch her face. Why am I crying? I am a soldier. Death lives with me, and I’ve exacted it upon others. I’ve even taken on the title of death. I shouldn’t be afraid…so why…?

The tears would still not stop, just like the sorrow consuming her heart. She hated it, but it was undeniable now. She wasn’t ready to die. She did not want to die. Mukuro had gone from the fearless soldier to the little girl who would hug her sister in comfort whenever her parents would argue.

This is just my mind playing tricks… No matter how hard she’d try to quell herself, her emotions were on autopilot, and everything was set to grief and despair.

The last dregs of her consciousness were fading, death practically beside her. In her last moments
of being awake, her body moved on its own as she weakly reached out her arm.

“E-even if it won’t happen…I want to see y-you again,” the soldier said, stuttering through the crying. “I want to see you again…Jun…ko…”

In those last seconds, the soldier vaguely made out a silhouette a few feet from her. She didn’t know if it was an animal, hallucination, or whatever. Her world became dark immediately after.

VVV

Once Chiaki arrived at the main headquarters of the Future Foundation, feelings of jubilation erupted from those around her. Miaya, extremely shy of contact as she was, nearly jumped out of her wheelchair to hug Chiaki. She was as cool as always, but even Kyoko smiled more warmly than Chiaki had seen her before. Asahina nearly broke her ribs after tackling her to the floor in weeping joy.

Division leaders and lower-level employees alike celebrated the return of the Thirteenth Division leader. The gamer expected to be interrogated immediately from suspicion, but nothing like that happened right away. She thought Chisa exaggerated when she said how worried everyone was, but the housekeeper—on a rare occasion—was honest.

Everyone was happy…except the gamer herself.

Earlier in her tenure with the organization, witnessing people celebrate her safety would’ve warmed her heart, but she couldn’t reciprocate their happiness. When she would try, her time would Mukuro would replay in her head along with Chisa’s accusation of her wanting to outdo Junko.

But, she had to put on a fake smile and recount the false story Chisa had gone over with her. The fake story would be while Mukuro was escorting Chiaki through the forest, they were randomly ambushed. In the commotion, Chiaki managed to escape. The gamer then contacted Chisa to pick her up.

And so, Chiaki told Kyoko and Juzo the false story. Kyoko was only allowed to question Chiaki over Juzo’s watchful gaze since the detective was still under sanctions. “That’s everything,” said Chiaki.
Kyoko touched her chin. “These hunters: you just happened to run into them and they attacked… Were they not Despairs? I’d assume they’d refrain from attacking Mukuro Ikusaba.”

“I don’t think so,” said Chiaki. “They said they hunt people for sport and denied having any affiliation to the Despairs.”

Juzo leaned back in his chair, feet propped on the table. “Ah, I’ve heard of those bastards. It’s a crime ring lead by some ex-veterans from all over the world. They kidnap people and hunt them down like a game. We’ve been trying to bust them for a year now.”

“Why did Ikusaba land in the forest?” asked Kyoko. “Was it intentional or did something go awry?”

“She mentioned the gas tank was lower than it was supposed to be. I don’t know where we were meant to go.”

“And what about a motive? Did you two communicate at all?”

“… Not really. She was mostly silent, only opting to give me orders occasionally. Whenever I’d ask what was going to happen, um, she’d ignore me…” The gamer hoped she sounded convincing because she knew her demeanor wasn’t selling it. *I’m bad at this…*

The detective’s pale eyes were studying her. “So, based on the timeline given, you landed in the forest late in the evening. You didn’t move again until dawn, and then you encountered these hunters. In the gunfight between them and Ikusaba, you managed to escape and contact help. Have I missed anything?”

“No…that’s everything.”

“Impressive that you got away,” said Juzo. “Not only did you escape from Ikusaba, you weren’t caught by the hunters either.”

Chiaki clenched her palms. “They had their hands full with each other. They said Muku—” The gamer stopped herself, realizing she was about to refer to her formally. And Kyoko seemed intrigued in response. “They said killing the Ultimate Soldier would make them legends.”
Silence ensued for a minute while Kyoko was writing something down. Then she said, “I suppose that’ll be all for now. Thanks for cooperating with me so shortly after arriving.”

“No problem.” The gamer held out her hand. “Thanks for trying so hard to get me back.”

Kyoko shook her hand. “Of course.”

Juzo burst into laughter, causing both division leaders to leer at him. “I know I’m not supposed to, but I can leave you two alone.”

Kyoko responded by laughing herself.

“Did you find that funny?”

“No, just amused at the irony.”

After an awkward moment Chiaki didn’t understand, the gamer left for the chairman’s office. She was free to return to her base after being questioned, but there was a question the gamer had for him. Miaya had to depart since she was busy, so Chiaki decided to do it now.

Soon, she arrived at his doors before knocking. After hearing him welcome her in, the gamer walked into his wide office. “Nanami,” greeted the old chairman, “what brings you here? I’d think you’d want to rest after the ordeal you went through.”

“Yeah, I’m really tired. But I wanted to ask you something if you’re not busy.”

Kazuo grinned while stroking his beard. “I’m happy to help if I can.”

“I was wondering…could you tell me why you said yes to me being a division leader?”

“Why I agreed?” The chairman took a sip of whatever was in his mug. “You were different from
the other division leaders. When you said you’d neither side with hope or despair, I couldn’t help being interested.”

“Do you still think that?”

“Well, I’d say the investment has paid off so far. You’ve been up to some very interesting things since working for the Future Foundation, hehe. Do you feel like you belong?”

“I enjoy helping people with the Future Foundation… But, sometimes I wonder if I know myself. What I wanted is to face the future, untied to either side. Now, though, I wondering if there is despair just waiting to rise…”

“I see. The way you speak with uncertainty reminds me of another young Reserve Course boy I knew once.”

A boy from the Reserve Course?

“I know it must be easy to be wayward, especially given your circumstances. That’s another reason I felt you should be a part of the Future Foundation.” The chairman gazed into Chiaki’s eyes, sending a chill up her spine because of how ominous it was. “Hope should always be tested, no matter the cause.”

For a moment there… “Y-yeah…” Chiaki gazed downward before bowing. “That’s all I needed, Chairman Tengan.”

“Anytime, Nanami.”

Chiaki turned to walk out, still mystified by the sensation she felt. What was that…?

VVV

The day after, Chiaki was back in her own base. She wasn’t working on anything but was in her office anyway. The nice view she had from her office became relaxing for her.
Since Chisa took some heat for agreeing to Mukuro’s demand without clearance, she was punished. From now until her punishment was over, she’d have to be stationed at the main base, working a menial job as Kyosuke’s secretary. How that was a punishment was confusing.

It was nice not having the housekeeper looming the hallways. It gave the base a relaxing atmosphere. Not to mention her despair exposure sensations were put on hold for the foreseeable future. Regardless, the gamer was still paranoid about the choker around her neck. It was like Chisa was still next to her.

In regards to Mukuro, a search team had been sent to the forest they traversed. It would take a good amount of time because of the forest’s density to find any bodies. Not that it mattered since Chiaki wouldn’t be told the what was found. Only a select few would be told. The gamer hoped Mukuro could be alive, but she didn’t hold her breath.

“Boss!” yelled Aoi, bursting into her office. She had some bandages around the leg Mukuro shot. The swimmer assured her it was no big deal and she’d be healed in no time. “I’m about to make a run. Wanna come with?”

“No, I’m just gonna play a game or something.”

Asahina put her hands on her hips “Oh boy, you’re in sad mode. You just got away from Ikusaba and escaped a high-level Despair again. Why aren’t you happier?”

Should I say this or not? “Hina, what did you think of Muk—Ikusaba as a classmate?”

“Huh?” Asahina tilted her head and stared at the ceiling before she said, “I don’t really know. She was kind of an introverted if I remember right. Guess I was impartial. Hehe, guess I’m lucky she didn’t knife me, with her being a crazy and all.”

“But, she did choose not to kill you.” The gamer regretted speaking because the way she said it sounded like a rebuttal.

“Oh, well, I thought she missed…” Asahina had a worried expression. “Did something happen between you two, Boss?”
“Um, no. I guess I’m still tired from everything that happened, I think. I’ll just stay here and rest, Hina.”

“Okay then. Feel better.” The swimmer exited, breaking the awkward moment.

It was disturbing how defensive she’d gotten over the soldier. Technically, she never got confirmation if that was the genuine Mukuro Ikusaba or not.

*What’s wrong with me?* The gamer rested her head on the desk. *Did I want to help Mukuro because I empathized with her past…or did I want to upstage Junko deep down…? Does that side of me exist…?*

Then the face of the man known as Enigma came to her. *And there’s still that guy left... Who is he?*

VVV

Under the murky sky stood a man, his long hair flowing in the breeze. He stood on a hill, overlooking the city in the distance. It was a city embroiled in chaos and despair, and it was there he’d find the one he hated, setting the stage for the “game” to enter its next phase.

He stared into the sky, his searing eyes unmoving. “This game is nearing its climax, it seems…”

*Author’s Note*

*And this long, climatic arc finally comes to an end!*

*If it wasn’t obvious, this arc was centered around Mukuro Ikusaba(?) and her backstory as a whole. It also gave me a chance to delve into Junko’s character some, and give insight into her origins. Not to mention a crapload of actions scenes. This arc might’ve had more than the last.*

*The escalation doesn’t stop since the next arc will really begin the descent into the true and final climax of this story. Look forward to skits at the end of the next chapter, and thank you for reading and being your beautiful selves!*
Why have I been so off lately? thought Chiaki, playing her game, leaning on a Future Foundation vehicle. Playing her game on duty was unprofessional, but boredom set in.

She stood under the evening sky by an abandoned building some Despairs had taken refuge in. The vice chairman himself, Kyosuke, decided to take on the mission himself. He claimed his skills were dull, and his secretary—for the time being—Chisa, encouraged him as well. They called Chiaki to be backup just in case.

Although, she wasn’t doing much backing up. Kyosuke, along with several other agents of his choosing, was clearing out the building with ease. There were at least five Despairs that had flown out a window already. Clearly, the gamer wasn’t needed here.

Chiaki didn’t mind since she’d been off ever since the encounter with Mukuro a couple weeks ago. She couldn’t answer a question about herself: Was what she felt towards Mukuro genuine friendship, or was it a deep desire to beat Junko?

This dilemma had been eating at her ever since Chisa said it. And making it worse, she wasn’t sure why it bothered her. But thinking about it made her head hurt.

“Just as you left a mark on her, she has left one on you as well,” are the words Chisa said that she keeps repeating in her head.

What mark did she leave on me… and what did I leave on her…? I had those bizarre hallucinations of her, but that stopped when she died. What else is there?

Chiaki sighed, wishing she could enjoy the weeks of peace there have been. After the assault on her base, things had gotten inactive in the Future Foundation. Despair activity had declined its steepest margin since Junko died. Apart from the strange incident in Towa City she only heard through rumors, things were quiet.

Rubbing her head, Chiaki said, “Why can’t it be that I wanted to help Mukuro? Is there a part of me that’d manipulate her for my own interest?” Chiaki’s stare went from her game to the ground. “That sounds like what Junko would do…”
“Chiaki?” said the voice of Chisa through the communication device.

“I’m listening, Ms. Yukizome.”

“You sound cranky. Hehe, is this mission lacking the excitement you’ve become used to?”

“Is there trouble?”

“No, it’s been a resounding success for the Future Foundation. I’m calling to ask you to report to the second floor. We’ve found a little girl, and I’d like you to escort her outside while we finish up things. And keep your guard up around her.”

“Is the girl a Despair?”

“That’s the thing; we’re not quite sure. She doesn’t have any psychotic tendencies and she seems normal enough. However, she wasn’t captive when we found her which implies she might’ve been aiding the Despairs in some way.”

“… I see. I’ll head there immediately.”

Chiaki stuffed her Game Girl in her pocket before entering the building. She kept a hand on VEIL in case any unwanted surprises popped out. Chisa said they’d mostly taken care of business, but better safe than sorry with Despairs.

After she made it through the first floor and arrived at the second, as the housekeeper said, an agent waited for her with a small girl by his side. She looked no older than thirteen, had brunette hair, and wore a blue dress “Here she is Ms. Nanami,” said the agent.

Chiaki didn’t mean to, but she grimaced upon seeing the young girl’s appearance, a nasty scar covering half her face. It seemed to be a burn wound as if someone hit her with a hot iron. Even so, the girl smiled modestly. “I’ll take it from here,” said Chiaki. “Come with me, little girl.”

The girl nodded before following Chiaki back downstairs. All the while Chiaki kept an eye on her in case any shenanigans ensue. But the gamer didn’t feel any malicious from the child. She kept
her head down, remained quiet, and maintain the same smile.

There’s no way this girl is a Despair. Still…I’ve seen weirder… “So, what’s your name?”

The girl looked up at her. “Ritsuko.” The girl had one of her front teeth missing.

“Well, Ritsuko, can you tell me why you’re here with Despair’s?”

“Um, sure... I was with my mommy and daddy when these people in masks came and took me. When I cried and scream, they burned my face…”

This girl isn’t a Despair. This girl had to be a victim. If she didn’t do as told, punishment awaited her. Chiaki grimaced as that reminded her of another unfortunate girl’s situation…sadly.

“You guys are the Future Foundation, right? Since I helped the bad guys…does that make me one of them too?”

“No, once we explain what happened to you, you’ll be fine. I promise.”

The girl gave her a toothy grin. “What’s your name, miss?”

“I’m Chiaki Nanami, Thirteenth Division leader, and former Ultimate Gamer.”

Ritsuko’s eyes lit up like the sun. “You’re an Ultimate! That means you went to Hope’s Peak Academy! I always wanted to go there!”

“What do you want your talent to be?”

“Hmm, I want to be…the Ultimate Princess!”

Chiaki giggled. It sounded like a child’s fantasy, but she was best friends with an actual princess. “I
went to the academy with a princess.”

“Wow, then maybe I can too!” Ritsuko’s smile slowly turned into a gloomy expression as she touched her damaged face. “Though…I guess you have to be *really* pretty to be one…”

Chiaki narrowed her eyes. What could she do to alleviate her pain? It’s not like she could turn back time. *Maybe I could*… “Take a look at this,” said Chiaki, rolling up her sleeves and pulling down her stockings.

Ritsuko gasped when she saw the gamer’s various scars. “What happened to you…?”

“Just like you, a bad person hurt me too. The important thing to remember is, while it may be hard, you must take the good and the bad so you can make a future of your own. Always keep trying, and it’ll work out, okay?”

Ritsuko grin reappeared. “Okay!”

Chiaki reached into her pocket, pulling out her Game Girl. “Do you like games?”

The next hour spent with Ritsuko passed by pleasantly. She hadn’t played many games in the past, but the young girl had taken a shine to them. Ritsuko even enjoyed hearing Chiaki’s long, comprehensive lectures about her feelings on games—something she could barely get even Hajime to listen to. Chiaki didn’t think she’d be good with children, but Ritsuko’s youthful imagination and wonder was a welcome reprieve from the usual cynicism of adulthood.

Ritsuko played her favorite game, Gala Omega, while Chiaki went on about her feelings on the past console wars when Chisa contact her. “You there, my savior?”

“I’m here. Is everything going well, Ms. Yukizome?”

“Yeah, we’ll be done here shortly. You sound like you’re in higher spirits than before. Something good happen?”

“Not really. I’m just getting along with Ritsuko, that little girl you told me to watch over. I’ve
“Is that so…? Chiaki, please don’t get too attached to that child. Don’t forget we still don’t know how much she aided the Despairs, or if she’s one herself.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Ritsuko was kidnapped and held against her will. She’s not a Despair.”

“I understand you think that, but this process can be very…delicate.”

“What do you mean?” After Ritsuko tugged on the gamer’s jacket, the girl pointed to Kyosuke along with an agent approaching from the building. Chiaki reassured the girl with a grin before she said, “The vice chairman is here, Ms. Yukizome; I’ll just explain the situation with him.”

“Chiaki, that may not—”

Chiaki muted the housekeeper before she said, “Vice Chairman, you need to know something regarding Ritsuko.”

“Ritsuko?” Kyosuke’s eyes drifted to the young girl. The moment his sharp gaze fell on her, Ritsuko timidly stood behind Chiaki.

*Why does he seem angry…?* “Y-yeah, that’s her name. Ms. Yukizome said she was under suspicion of being in league with the Despairs, but she told me—”

“I’m aware of the situation. We got it out of the Despairs we just arrested.”

“Great, so there shouldn’t be any issue since it wasn’t her—”

“You weren’t supposed to interact with the girl. Watching over her until we finished was the extent of your duty, Nanami.” In an act that sent a chill up Chiaki’s spine, Kyosuke drew his katana, its spotless blade reflecting her stunned look. “Step aside.”
“W-what are…?” Ritsuko grabbed onto her coat, an intense fear present in her expression. Chiaki’s pulse rose so fast, it was difficult to get words out coherently. She gulped before asking, “… What are you doing?”

“You know the rules; I’m going to cut this despair down.”

The gamer knew what the answer would be, but hoped she’d be wrong. The fear Ritsuko gave off seeped into her as her arms shook in fright. “But, if you know what happened to her, then how can you think she’s a Despair? Ritsuko is a victim.”

“Wrong. We’ve already heard the acts she assisted the Despairs in doing. This child is anything but an innocent bystander.” Kyosuke narrowed his eyes at the girl. “Isn’t that, right?”

Ritsuko still hung tight to Chiaki, tears falling. “N-no…I d-didn’t want to…”

*Could this be another trick?* In the time she’d worked for the Future Foundation, she had seen things so odd, it’d only happened in games. A young kid fabricating lies and being a Despair isn’t unheard of. How would she know the girl, whom she just met an hour ago, was being honest?

However, the look in Ritsuko’s eyes made Chiaki pause. She just had a pleasant time with the young girl, something that’d be hard if she was a Despair. Chisa’s mentorship gave her an eye for people wearing a “mask,” and there wasn’t a single moment Chiaki thought Ritsuko was being dishonest.

This would put her in trouble, but she summoned whatever courage she had and said, “Sorry, but I don’t agree, sir. In the time we’ve spent, I haven’t seen any sign she’s a Despair. I think she should be given the benefit of the doubt and a chance to defend herself.”

Kyosuke gazed back at her, his gaze piercing. He had such an aura of absolute command around him, Chiaki almost apologized for being insubordinate.

She thought a verbal lashing was on the way, but he closed his eyes and said, “We’ve had many cases like this before. Just a week ago, I had fine agents assume a group of young kids were innocent, even though they weren’t prisoners. And they died because the children blindsided them. I can recount many other instances of this.”
“I understand, but—” *But what?* she thought. Kyosuke’s in charge of all day-to-day operations, meaning he’d seen everything that happened in the Future Foundation. If he said young Despairs was an issue, he had numbers and data to back him up. All Chiaki had was her gut feeling. *Not again…*

“And no answer, once again. All this time and all you’ve been through, and you’re still just as directionless as the day you became a division leader. If you don’t have suitable solutions, you’re in no positions to suggest anything.”

*It’s happening again…* Just like when Chisa lectured her in the rain about her idiocy of saving Mukuro, Chiaki was speechless against the one she tried to refute. Was she really wrong all along? Should someone like her, who refused to consign to hope or despair, make decisions for those who have more convictions?

*Was it me who was wrong the whole time after all…?* And then she looked at Ritsuko, attempting to study her with as much emotion removed as she could.

Just like before, she couldn’t pinpoint why, but the young girl didn’t have the *feel* of a Despair.

Chiaki hadn’t talked about it with anyone because she didn’t fully get it herself, but after a few months of being in the Future Foundation—she could “sense” despair. She felt it most of the time Chisa was close, as well as every time a Despair was near her.

The gamer hypothesized it could’ve formed because of normalization to Chisa’s persona, another strange effect of being in that machine for so long, or maybe even having something to do with the despair exposure sessions. Regardless, she was sure there was something to this phenomenon shortly after the Mukuro fiasco.

But of course, she couldn’t tell the vice chairman her reason for not doubting Ritsuko was because she didn’t feel she was a Despair. He’d scoff before labeling her crazy. The gamer wasn’t sure even Chisa would easily believe in this ability if she told her.

“Vice Chairman, I can’t explain it, and I know that sounds stupid. If I was you, I’d think the same thing. But believe me when I say if you give Ritsuko a chance, she’ll prove she’s not a Despair.”

With sharp eyes, both unmoving and agitated, Kyosuke said, “Move aside, Nanami. If you refuse this order from a superior, it’ll be insubordination, and you’ll face arrest. The level of crimes these
Despairs committed calls for execution. This is your final warning.”

Chiaki’s expression became desperate. “But you’ll kill a kid without knowing if she’s innocent! That’s just a witch hunt! How does it make us better than Junko—”

In one smooth motion, Kyosuke shoved Chiaki to the side, knocking her to the ground. It didn’t hurt, but it was so fast, the gamer had no chance of reacting in time. With her guardian out of the way, Ritsuko fell to her knees, the vice chairman standing above her with cold eyes.

“Please don’t kill her, Munakata!” yelled Chiaki. “She’s just a kid that was taken from her home!”

Kyosuke ignored her as he raised the katana above his head. Chiaki, having witnessed his swordplay, knew he could end it. Ritsuko’s life would be over in an instant. “This is for the sake of a successful future, Nanami. We must stomp out despair, lest another Junko Enoshima rises!”

Just when it looked like Ritsuko was about to meet her end, things slowed down.

*Are you going to break another promise?* said a voice that rang in Chiaki’s head.

She recognized this voice; it filled her with anger the moment she did. The shadow of Junko practically stood over her, leering mockingly.

*Just like you failed my sister, hehe. I twisted Mukuro, and your boss is going to kill that innocent little girl because he fears the world of despair I created. Looks like...you fail to beat me again, hahahaha!*

“Not again,” said Chiaki, her fingers moving to VEIL’s touchscreen. “I won’t let you win again, Junko!”

After Chiaki activated her electrified palm, something happened she never thought she’d do. Right now, no thoughts were in her head; her body moved all on its own.

“Argh!” yelled Kyosuke. The reason being, Chiaki just planted her palm on his back, sending electricity throughout his body.
What...what have I...? thought Chiaki, Kyosuke falling to the ground. He glanced at her with a look, not of fury or pain, but pure shock. The steel of his katana hit the ground as the vice chairman followed suit. He was face down on the ground, unconscious.

“... What did I do...?” So much adrenaline and emotion ran through her, Chiaki barely processed her actions. There wasn’t much time to calm down since she caught the agent that accompanied Kyosuke moving in her peripheral.

“You traitor!” he yelled, close to pulling his weapon on Chiaki.

No choice! Chiaki activated VEIL’s sonic wave, stunning the man by blasting him back. She had attacked two of her allies now. Just imagining the repercussions made her tremble. But now wasn’t the time to think. She needed to act.

“Come on!” she said, grabbing Ritsuko’s hand, the girl’s teary eyes showing how confused she was. But she complied as the duo ran off into the streets. Chiaki didn’t have a set area or destination; all she could focus on was getting Ritsuko away from here.

After a few minutes, their breaths became heavy, the nonstop running draining her and Ritsuko. With the city abandoned, a common occurrence since the Tragedy begun, the artificially lit streets were empty, the only noise being their rapidly moving feet against the asphalt.

I need to get her out of here. I’ll take her to...to...where...? No haven came to her because there wasn’t one. Both sides, Despairs and the Future Foundation, were no home for this girl. In a world where there was very little in-between, where could Ritsuko go? Furthermore, Chiaki’s location would always be known to Chisa if the infernal choker was around her neck.

“Miss, aren’t you going to be in trouble now...?”

“... Don’t worry about me. I’m going to get you somewhere safe.” I don’t know where the way forward leads, but it must be better than what’s behind us.

Sadly, something appeared in front of her that wasn’t welcome. One of the Future Foundation vehicles came towards them. They’ve already caught up!
She turned around, deciding it was best to head the other way and look for an alley or big building to hide in. Unfortunately, another Future Foundation vehicle was coming from the other direction. *Cornered on both sides...*

Ritsuko latched onto Chiaki. “W-what now!”

Chiaki clenched her palms before putting a hand on VEIL. “I’ll make a path for us. Just stay close to me, and I’ll protect you.”

“Is that so?” said a familiar voice behind her. Chisa smiled before stepping out of the car, her white coat flowing in the breeze. She took a step forward, streetlights from above giving her face an ominous yet fitting shadow. “It seems you’ve taken the savior thing quite literally. Though, this isn’t what I had in mind.”

Chiaki furrowed her brow, standing in front of Ritsuko protectively. “I couldn’t let Munakata kill Ritsuko, Ms. Yukizome. She’s innocent.”

“It’s in your best interest hand her over, young lady. The more you resist, the worse this will get for you.”

“Then what? You going to murder her like you did those orphans just so you can have a cheap laugh later!”

“That girl isn’t my problem, you are. And right now, you’ve become a big problem. Disobeying orders, assaulting the vice chairman, abetting someone under suspicion of working with the Despairs: do you understand the situation you’re in?”

“Then help me. You can do anything you want in the Future Foundation. Help me prove Ritsuko is innocent, and I promise I—”

“Shush.”

The venom combined with her glare made both Chiaki and Ritsuko take a step back. The gamer got that feel of despair-filled intent, and it felt potent enough to instill distress.
"You really need to stop making promises you can’t keep. I want to help you Chiaki, but one thing you need to learn is appreciation. Whether it’s this girl or Ikusaba, you seem to be intent on helping anyone who isn’t me—the person who made you who you are.”

“… The reason is that you’re not the real you. The Chisa Yukizome I knew would’ve stood up to the entire world if she saw an innocent person in need. And you keep thinking I’m going to treat the current you the same way?” Chiaki took a step forward. “Stop taking credit for things the real Ms. Yukizome did!”

“Oh, and who is the reason the real Ms. Yukizome died?”

There it was. She didn’t need a knife or a gun because the only thing that truly stung Chiaki was the words just spoken: the ugly truth of her vain attempt to beat Junko the first time. She accepted her weakness was a big part, but it always hurt. And nothing brought those memories back quite like gazing upon the current Chisa Yukizome.

“I won’t say it again, Chiaki. Stand down.”

Chiaki closed her eyes. “The real Ms. Yukizome never would’ve back down.” She glared at the housekeeper, eyes determined. “So, I won’t either!”

The former teacher-student duo glared at each other, neither standing down. It felt like months of tension between the two finally coming to a head. The gamer faced someone better and smarter, not to mention she could literally make her head explode, but she wasn’t going to let her murder for fun anymore.

Instead of a menacing or witty reply, Chisa beamed. Somehow, she seemed more intimidating now. “Chiaki, remember when the mutual killing game broadcast began, and you wanted to tell everyone the truth? We played a game then.”

“How could I forget?” Chisa was referring to when she dared Chiaki to kill her with a knife. Of course, she couldn’t do it.

“Well, let’s begin round two. You want to be a hero and pay homage to my past self?” Chisa held out her arms. “Then strike me down without mercy. And don’t think about holding back… because I will make you pay.”
Chiaki but her lip. This was exactly why she hated arguing against Chisa above anyone else. The housekeeper knew her so well. She knew how to get under her skin, make her doubt her actions, and what weak points to strike. It was like playing a game against a computer programmed to know all your moves beforehand.

Even so, Chiaki wasn’t going to let Chisa kill Ritsuko. *Ms. Yukizome still needs me; she won’t kill me. All I need it to get Ritsuko somewhere safe!*

Chiaki placed her hand on VEIL, intent on attacking with all her might. But when she did, the face of Chisa made her freeze. Despite all her talk about this Chisa being fake…assaulting her was difficult. When she’d try, her inner voice would remind her this was someone she once loved…and still did in an unexplainable way.

 That isn’t her…the person she is now is…! For a second, Chiaki saw a shadow stretched from Ms. Yukizome take shape. It was the shape of the one she hated most, smiling like she always did in her vivid nightmares. *She’s just another Junko now!*  

The moment her fingers moved across VEIL’s touchscreen, Chisa’s eyes widened. It filled her with confidence knowing the housekeeper didn’t think she’d do it—but she was. She was going to release all the rage that’s been building since her awakening in one fell swoop.

At least, that was her plan until a stinging sensation in her back sent a violent shock through her body. A gasp barely escaped before Chiaki hit the ground, completely paralyzed.

“Chiaki!” yelled Ritsuko. The girl approached her before an older male agent that had appeared from behind restrained her. He wasted no time handcuffing the girl.

*I was so caught up with Ms. Yukizome, I let him blindside me. Must have shot me with stun darts… I’m powerless now…*

A shadow engulfed her. It belonged to Chisa who looked down at her with a teasing grin. “Made you look.”

“…Ms. Yukizome, please don’t hurt her.”

Chisa turned to Ritsuko, hands on her hips, indecision on her face. After everything that just
happened, it’d be unsurprising to see Chisa execute the girl in front of the gamer. When the housekeeper reached into her pockets, it had to be a knife she was fishing out.

Instead, it was a pair of keys she dug out and swung around her finger. Facing the agent, she said, “I’ll personally escort Chiaki back. Gently take the girl back to base for detainment.”

“Yes, mam.” Ritsuko glanced at Chiaki before the agent pulled her away into the car. The gamer mouthed, “It’ll be okay,” before she turned away.

A grunt escaped as Chisa pulled Chiaki to her feet and handcuffed her. Amid the tense silence between them, the gamer said, “… Thank you, Ms. Yukizome.”

The housekeeper didn’t respond, opting to shove Chiaki in the car before taking the driver’s seat. She wasn’t smiling and didn’t so much as give a glance in her direction.

She set her eyes on the pitch-black sky, wondering what repercussions would follow and what the relationship between her and the Future Foundation would be now.

VVV

Honestly, Chiaki half-expected Chisa to take her somewhere private and “punish” her bad behavior. But no such thing happened. The duo was silent the entire ride and didn’t communicate when they arrived at the Future Foundation base.

Chisa led her to an empty office and told her to wait. After confiscating her phone and—more annoyingly—her game, the housekeeper left. Two agents stationed themselves at the door in case she got any bold ideas.

It’s not until she sat in the quiet room for a few minutes by herself did the gravity of her actions come down upon her. She attacked her boss and nearly attacked Chisa. There were many that still suspected her in the organization, and this wouldn’t help. Kirigiri might raise an eyebrow…and Sakakura might tear my head off…

Chiaki sighed when a certain therapist came to mind. How will Miaya react to it? After all that talk about self-control…and I go and do this…
And her exasperation grew as she pondered how hard the vice chairman would discipline her. Termination might be the least of her worries. She could face jail time with other Despairs or even execution on the grounds of treason.

A path where she got out of this with a mild reprimand was likely a fantasy. She stared at the ceiling, the luminescent lights shining down, and waited for whatever judgment came her way.

The next hour that passed was so uneventful, Chiaki started to drift in and out of sleep. But her drowsiness ended when Chisa opened the door. She beckoned her to follow, which Chiaki did.

So far, the walk went the same way the car ride did. Both were silent, Chisa humming with her arms behind her back while Chiaki sauntered along. They were never this silent when together. It wasn’t eerie as much as it was petty, like two sisters who weren’t on speaking terms after an argument.

At last, Chiaki decided to come clean. “Ever since the incident with Mukuro, I’ve developed an ability to feel despair. When I’m around Despairs, it always goes off. I never got the feeling with Ritsuko. After realizing I had this ability, I understood why I wanted to save Mukuro. She could exude a malicious intent, but it wasn’t despair.”

Chiaki didn’t respond right away. “I figured as much. The way you were acting seemed to be rooted by much more than raw emotion. Do you know when this started?”

“No, I just…could one day, I think. I don’t know what brought it on, either.”

“Hmm, what do you feel you’re near me?”

“It turns off and on…kinda? I don’t know; it’s really odd with you.”

“I see. Well then…” Chisa jumped in front of Chiaki so fast, the gamer flinched. The housekeeper grabbed her hands, eyes full of luster. “You are simply amazing!”

As Chisa hugged her, shaking from side to side, Chiaki internally kicked herself, a deadpan expression on her face How does she keep doing this? “I should’ve known you were faking anger.
You weren’t serious back there, were you?”

“Nope! I was testing you your resolve, and it was magnificent to watch. Can you imagine the “you” of just a few months ago standing up to me like that? Not to mention you’ve become so in-tune with despair without succumbing to it yourself! Yes…you’re much more of a savior now.”

Chiaki pulled away from the housekeeper. “And again, what’s the point? The Future Foundation has won Ms. Yukizome. In about a year, the Despair’s projections say they’ll be such a small threat, the Tragedy will be declared over.”

Chisa skipped forward before stopping in front of a door. She shifted her gaze towards Chiaki, a sly smile on her face. “This game still has a ways to go, and we’re nearing the final level.”

There it was again, Chisa’s vague declaration of a game—a rare instance of Chiaki dreading a game. “You won’t tell me what that means, but can you give me some kind of hint?”

“Sorry, it’s better you don’t know right now. Though, I’ll tell you some information I’m sure you’re dying to know. Actually, I’ll tell you two pieces of info.”

She’s going to be upfront?

“This is top secret; after thoroughly searching the forest you two had faced the hunters in, Ikusaba’s body was gone. What’s more, after analyzing the DNA left by her with that of the sample we have of her from the past…it was a perfect match.”

Chiaki put a hand to her chest, letting a smile escape. Ironically, learning of a Junko’s sister being real and possibly alive lifted her spirits. “So, not only could she be alive…she was telling the truth all along about being real.”

“And again, what’s the point? The Future Foundation has won Ms. Yukizome. In about a year, the Despair’s projections say they’ll be such a small threat, the Tragedy will be declared over.”

“Yep, most likely. Happy now your new bestie could return to kidnap you again?”

As she just showed, Chisa had the ability to drain her spirits with a sentence. And, frustratingly, she had a point. “… How did Junko fake her death? And why didn’t she do it for herself? Mukuro didn’t tell me everything.”
“It is a quite a mystery isn’t it, hehe?”

The gamer narrowed her eyes. “Well…maybe you can tell me what you did to Chairman Tengan?”

Chisa paused before she winked. “Perhaps you’ll find the truth. Now, walk through these doors so Kyosuke can have a chat with you?”

“Eh…?”

“He requested an audience with you, one on one.”

Their conversation was immersive enough for Chiaki to not realize they were outside the infirmary. Her palms started sweating upon imaging how furious her boss must be. The vice chairman was scary enough when he was just scowling. “I-I don’t wanna…”

“Now, now, young lady. You made the choices you felt were best back there, and now you must take responsibly. He’s not going to kill you, silly…most likely.”

Chiaki puffed out her cheeks. “You mean how like you take responsibly for every bad thing you’ve done?”

Chisa opened the door before grabbing Chiaki’s arm. “Whoever said I was responsible?” Chisa yanked her arm, forcibly sending Chiaki into the Kyosuke’s room. She waved before closing the door in the gamer’s face.

_Ugh, one of these days, I’m gonna_— She halted her thoughts because a cold wind blew past her. Slowly, she turned around to see her boss lying in bed, staring at her with his usual sour face. It felt as if she entered a lion’s den.

“Nanami,” said Kyosuke.

Chiaki gulped, her head down. “Vice Chairman…” She sat near his bed, making sure there weren’t any swords or guns nearby. Though, Kyosuke could take her out with his bare hands.
Normally, VEIL’s charge isn’t enough to hospitalize someone since it’s for self-defense. However, in her haste, Chiaki hit his spine. He wasn’t paralyzed, but it’d be at least a week until his lower body returned to peak condition.

After learning she almost crippled him, a wave of anguish washed over her. She toughed through her fear and shame to ask an important question. “S-so…um…am I fired…?”

“No.”

Chiaki perked up a little. “Oh, then, are you going to throw me in prison…?”

“No.”

What the heck? “… Are you going to chop my—”

“I’m not going to punish you.”

Chiaki didn’t intend to let her jaw drop, but this news stunned her. Unless this was a cruel ruse to get her hopes up only to crush them, the fantasy of getting off easy was a reality. “Um, okay?”

“You seem disenchanted. If you’re that dissatisfied, I can think of a punishment for you.”

“No, no, that’s fine. But why? I disobeyed and even went as far as attacking you. You told Kirigiri examples always have to be made, so…I don’t understand why you’re letting me off easy like this.”

Kyosuke gaped at his blankets. “At first, I was irate. But after I calmed down and thought about it, your actions confused me. What would make you, the stoic gamer, attack me in cold blood? You’re many things Nanami, but not stupid. The consequences wouldn’t be lost on you…so why do such a thing for a child you’ve never met I wondered.”

“And…what was your answer?”
“Simple, if you weren’t the unreasonable one…then it must’ve been me.”

Chiaki gasped. “You’re saying…I was right to stop you?”

“Yes, and it’s because of a point you alluded to. In that child, or any Despair, I only see another potential Junko Enoshima. Only…that’s exactly what Enoshima wanted, to sow division and plant that fear in us. I had a lapse of judgment, and played right into that woman’s hands—so much so that I was willing to cut down a child.”

Kyosuke closed his eyes. “I thank you for clearing my head, Chiaki Nanami, and reminding me of my duty.”

Getting words out was impossible for the gamer, the vice chairman putting her in awe. He had his eternal businessman expression on, but his tone sounded sincere. Miaya and Chisa always said his actual demeanor was like this away from work. Up until know, Chiaki considered it about as real as the Loch Ness Monster.

Chiaki, close to tearing up from the praise, bowed her head. “Yes, sir. Anytime.”

“Well, I could certainly do without the threat of losing my legs.”

“I’m so sorry about that; it was an accident.” Since this was going so well, Chiaki decided now was best to press so more. “What’s going to happen to Ritsuko?”

“She’ll undergo some question before being put into protective care. Agents are tracking down her parents, should they be alive, as we speak. If they are gone, we’ll put her in the orphanage program the Future Foundation started for kids who’ve lost families to the Tragedy.”

_Thank goodness._ Just an hours ago, dread was overtaking her. After finding out Mukuro could be alive, Ritsuko wouldn’t be killed, and she’d get off without reprimand—her spirits were soaring. _Hold on…_ “What about the agent I attacked?”

Kyosuke waved her off. “He’s fine. Like I said, you were in the right to stop me because I acted irrationally. You’re free to go back to your station.”
“Yes.” She stood before heading towards the exit. When she put her hand on the doorknob, she got the urge to push her luck a little further. *Should I or not? Would he go for that?*

Finally, she turned around and took in a deep breath before yelling, “I’m going to plan a return party for you, Vice Chairman!” In return, she received a confused stare from Kyosuke. She blushed because of how unusual her delivery was.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m still upset about hurting this badly, so with your permission, I’d like to gather up the division leaders and celebrate your return…”

She expected an instant rejection, but as the theme of today was going, Kyosuke said, “If you can actually manage to get them all to come, you can do what you want.”

“I will; convincing all them will be easy, I think.”

She didn’t know if it was a figment of her imagination, but Chiaki saw a grin from her boss before walking out of the room.

VVV

“I take it the talk went well?” asked Chisa, entering Kyosuke’s room. “Chiaki was practically floating when I saw her.”

“I think I might have to separate you two.”

“Why’s that?”

Kyosuke smiled. “You’ve made her too much like you.”
“Heh, guilty. Guess I have an opportunity to be the Ultimate Nurse. Gotta get you healed up quickly so you can be at your party.”

Kyosuke turned to the window. “You know I’m not one for gatherings, but I decided to entertain that idea because I knew it wouldn’t happen… So why is it that I’m starting to believe she’ll actually succeed?”

“Because you’re starting to see what makes her unique, Kyosuke. In fact, it seems most of the organization has warmed up to her. The savior title isn’t even talked about jokingly anymore.”

Chisa put a hand over her mouth, her grin twisted into a crooked smirk. Perfect, hehe.

Author’s Notes

Guess what time it is… That’s right!

Random Skit #10: Lolita Salon

“Say,” said Chiaki, checking her hand since she was in the middle of a game with Celestia, “what would it take to get my hair all poufy and twisty like that?”

The Lolita put a hand over her mouth, giggling. “Why, this natural masterpiece you see is a culmination of much time and devotion. Being a Lolita is a life choice, you know?”

“What would it take for me to try it out?”

“You’d have to grow your hair, buy the top-quality hair care products, and hire a talented hairstylist; those sorts of things.”

“Ugh…that sounds like a lot of work…”

“Or,” said Celestia, taking off her wig, almost causing Chiaki to pop out of her seat, “you can just purchase a wig and skip the in-between, hehe.”
“So, you were lying again…”

**Random Skit #11: The Freckled Knight**

A young Mukuro walked by the sidewalk by herself on her way from school when she heard someone yell, “Oh no! Someone help me!”

She recognized the voice in an instant. “Junko!” When she tracked the voice down, she saw Junko cornered in an alley by three bullies from her school. *I haven’t seen much of her lately, and it must be because she’s bullied after school!*

“We’ve got you this time, you witch!” one of them said. They gazed at her with fury.

That is, until Mukuro ran to Junko. The moment the bullies caught her running towards them like a superhero about to beat up bad guys, they got wide-eyed and ran away. “I’m here, Junko.”

“About time,” she said, smiling from ear to ear.

“Are you hurt?”

“Why would I be hurt?”

“Er, you were getting bullied, right?

“Ha-ha, who do you think I am? I was just inflicting psychological torment on them one at a time and I guess I was too sloppy so they revolted against me. Gotta work on that some more.” Junko skipped away. “That was a cool swoop in though, eyesore!”

*Wait, so…does that make me the villain in this situation…?*

**Random Skit #12: Sleep Talk**
Chiaki walked through the forest, as Mukuro commanded her. Though, she couldn’t get a strange phenomenon she witnessed at night out of her head. “Um, Mukuro, do you talk in your sleep?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Well, last night…I kinda heard you saying Naegi’s name over and over again.”

Mukuro grabbed her cheeks, her face flushed with red. “T-that’s not true. You must’ve been hearing things—yes, that’s it!”

“But you were kinda loud and smiling a lot… I think I heard my name too?”

“I-I’m telling you you’re wrong! Does that sound like something the Ultimate Soldier would do? Your…your hunger caused you to hear things is all!”

“And then there was really, really freaky part when you told Junko to stop squeezing your…”

Mukuro appeared within a millimeter of her face in a flash, a knife held up beside her. “It never happened.”

“It never happened,” repeated Chiaki, erasing the memories from her mind.
Save the Subversion

*Ever since I was a young girl, I’d always have a reoccurring nightmare.*

The foul stench of smoke stung the nose of a girl standing on a tall hill, overlooking a chaotic scene around her. The tall fires danced as it ravaged the land, growing in strength after every second. The burning air caused her skin to itch and made her eyes water. Truly, it was a hell of biblical proportions, and yet…

*Whenever I’d have the nightmare, I’d wake up screaming before running to my parent’s room for comfort. But…after the “me” that used to exist faded away, the nightmare changed…*

Whenever this nightmare occurred, the girl would start sobbing. Feelings of sorrow and loss would crush her under the gravity of despair. At least, that’s how it used to be. Now, a different reaction happened.

*Before, I’d weep uncontrollably until I awoke, but now—*

The girl ran her fingers through her auburn hair before slowly turning around, a wide grin on her face.

*I find myself grinning with extreme glee…*

VVV

Chisa opened her eyes, the sound of rainfall colliding against the car. It was a wet, murky day as the housekeeper’s driver took her to a special meeting. She was in one of the cities still heavily populated with civilians—or “safe cities” as the Future Foundation called it—to make her meeting appear casual…though, her contact wasn’t someone she’d tell others about.

After temporary reassignment because of the indecent with Mukuro, doing as she pleased became harder. But she foresaw that possibility. Given the circumstances, it was the best route she had given the nasty surprise of the Ultimate Soldier appearing. It mattered little, anyway; she accomplished most of what needed doing already.
Citizens on the sidewalk carried their umbrellas in the persisting rain as she thought of her favorite former student. For the last week, Chiaki asked all the division leaders to attend the party she planned for Kyosuke’s return. He still doubted she’d pull it off, but Chiaki was making excellent progress. Last Chisa had heard, the gamer’s current target was Ruruka. A daunting task, but Chisa believed in her.

*Hehe, ironic she’s doing this since it’ll be an excellent litmus test.* If Chiaki gathered all the different-minded Ultimates for something as trivial as a party, it’d prove she accomplished another goal Chisa wanted: getting the organization to warm up to her. Despite their differences, they’d all have one thing in common, which was Chiaki.

And that played right into the housekeeper’s hands.

*It’s astounding how far she’s come. At first, I thought this would be a fun project at best, but now… everything’s coming together. Much longer until the savior gets her real trial…*

“We’re coming up on the street now, mam,” said the driver, stopping because of the red light. “Would you like me to accompany you?”

“No, I’ll be fine. This won’t last more than a few minutes.”

Once the car arrived at its desired stop, in front of a luxury hotel, she grabbed her umbrella before exiting the car. Her heels clicked against the cement before the warm, dry air of the hotel lobby washed over her.

After a quick ride in the elevator and a short walk, Chisa reached the room. She knocked three times, as housekeeper etiquette dictates, and smiled when her contact opened the door. “Greetings, Komaeda.”

The former Ultimate Lucky student welcomed her in with a polite smile. “Punctual as always, Ms. Yukizome.”

Chisa put her hands on her lap, sitting on the edge of the bed while Nagito leaned against the wall next to the window. A simple glance told Chisa some excellent housekeepers tended to this room, but since Nagito had the lights were off, it was gloomy. It fit the boy across from her well.
To the naked eye—even though he was as potent a Despair as anyone—he had a polite and pure demeanor. He appeared the same on the outside as he did during their Hope’s Peak Academy days. But Chisa saw through that facade. Underneath lied a ghastly human being with enough depravity to ward off most Despairs.

“I’m glad you decided to meet me, Komaeda. I’m sure you can imagine how frustrating it is getting in touch with all of you individually.”

“Oh, no problem. After the trouble you went to purchasing this pricey room, the least I could do was oblige. I should tell you the rest of Ultimate Despair doesn’t like hanging around me much. But I guess that’s anyone really.”

“Must be disappointing; I can imagine how irritating it must be for them to treat you the same regardless of despair or not.”

“Nah, they’re all busy spreading untold despair—which is exactly what I want.” A grin crept across his face. “It makes it that much better when the Ultimate Hope arises.”

Chisa noticed a certain someone wasn’t with Nagito. “So, what ever happened to the seed of despair you were cultivating? Was the little cucumber head too much?”

Nagito crossed his arms, sighing. “Unfortunately, while she had potential, she’s nowhere near Junko Enoshima. Her despair could never bring forth the hope I desire. Shame really; I thought she could do it, given time.”

“Well, you tried. Maybe next time.”

Nagito’s smile returned. “I still stand by what I said before: You’d be an amazing successor to her. You can match her cunning, despair, and passion if you wanted. I’m sure if you let yourself fully embrace despair like the rest of us, you’d become something extraordinary.”

“That’s kind of you, but I’m afraid not. I’m more efficient as I am now, and…I’m cultivating a seed of my own.”

“…Oh, and how’s it going?”
“It’s moving along, but it could swing either way. If things go right, the force against despair you seek will show itself brilliantly. Though, I don’t know if it’s the ‘hope’ you want.”

Nagito’s eyes widened. “Wow, this person must be something. Perhaps…I could meet them?”

“You will, in due time.” Chisa fished an envelope out of her pocket before handing it to Nagito. “I want you to share this message with the others. I’m restricted on how I can move around, so you’re better suited to be the messenger.”

Nagito carefully stuffed the envelope in his jacket. “I’ll make extra sure they get it; though, I can’t promise you they’ll agree to see me.”

“They will once they know I sent it. Effective immediately, Ultimate Despair will gather in Japan to conduct the mission regarding the Neo World Program.”

Nagito sat up, eyes glowing with excitement. “Ha-ha, no way! I didn’t think we’d be conducting it this soon! The others are gonna be so excited!”

“Yes, I wanted the Neo World Program to get a bit farther in progress, but because of certain developments—putting it off any longer would do more harm than good.”

“Are you sure you want this to happen? Personally, I can’t wait to see what kind of hope and despair that’ll result from this, but it could mean the end of the Future Foundation…and her becoming invincible.”

“I’ll be fine with either outcome. It’s you I’m impressed with. I mean, if this goes according to her plan, you’ll truly become one with the woman you hate.”

“Ha-ha, I know the risk. If the hope I desire doesn’t arise, then she’ll get her way. But…I’ve already begun to reject her influence…”

Nagito put his left hand on the window, raindrops falling on the other side. She didn’t think anything of it at first, but then a …interesting sight awaited. Raising an eyebrow, Chisa said, “Oh my…is that what I think it is…?”
In the darkness of the room, vehicle lights flashing as they went by, a woman’s hand was lying on the window. Given what Nagito said, Chisa knew whose hand it was—or at least whose hand it’s supposed to be.

“That’s right. I’ve taken her into me, the true Ultimate Despair.” Nagito laughed, pitch filled with insanity. “I’m going use her despair myself, and from it…an outstanding hope will be born!”

Chisa narrowed her eyes. “… And how did you obtain that?”

“Mikan was the one that salvaged it. I couldn’t believe the body was so intact after the execution. Originally, I had something else in mind, but I had to settle for her hand. I’m sure the others interacted with it in their own ways, but I can’t tell you how since I didn’t stay to watch.”

“… What dedication. I’d never go as far as attaching her to myself. Tell me: now she’s apart you, have your feelings changed regarding her? Her blood is flowing through you now.”

“Nope, even now, she’s still the woman I hate the—”

Hmm? thought Chisa, mystified by Nagito’s odd behavior. He eyes twitched as they were agape, there was no emotion on his face, and he stared into space as is all his intelligence vanished. It was like a robot who began malfunctioning.

“Huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh? I meant I love her…no that’s no right? Don’t I love—I mean hate her… Yes, I hate her and love her at the same time. No, that not right either, I believe. I… don’t…” Then Nagito stopped speaking, silence taking over the room.

Chisa preferred to wait, interested to see the reaction of the lucky student. Once he broke from his stupor, his eyes scanned the room until it fell on the housekeeper, his usual smile returning. It’s like he forgot Chisa was in the room with him.

“Was there anything else you needed, Ms. Yukizome?”

“… No, that’ll be all.” Chisa shuffled her jaw before standing, laughing under her breath. “It seems my class’s diverse, animated tendencies persisted even after despair took over.”
“Well, we are your students after all. Old habits really do die hard.”

She adjusted her vest before checking the time. “I’m on a tight schedule, but there’s one more piece of good news I’ll tell you. Well, good news for you. There’s a special person I’ve set up to be in the extraction zone.”

Nagito paused before his eyes lit up. “Y-you don’t mean…”

“Yep, he’ll be the perfect one for this. Just remember even a bleeding heart like him could refuse cooperation, so be on your best behavior, Komaeda.”

“Oh, of course, it’s just—gosh, how incredible this is! To think the Ultimate Hope himself will be the link that begins this battle of hope and despair! A more perfect script couldn’t exist. Surely a hope unlike any other will be born from this!”

“I’m glad you’re so enthusiastic.”

While Chisa began to depart, with intrigue in his tone, Nagito said, “What will you do in the meantime? More work on that seed you mentioned?”

She gleefully glanced back. “Off to set the stage some more.”

Nagito put his hands together, admiration beaming from him. “Being able to manipulate a massive organization like the Future Foundation... What will be born from your despair I wonder…?”

Without answering, Chisa exited the dark room.

VVV

With the business with Nagito done, Chisa went the Future Foundation base where Kyosuke’s recuperation was held like she did every day. Day by day his legs were improving, but he couldn’t leave the hospital yet—a fact that made him grouchy. He insisted Chisa didn’t need to be there so often, and would rather her stick to work, but the housekeeper had fun playing nurse to her close friend.
And her communications with him were important for the next phase of things to move along.

Chisa waved at her coworkers as she passed them on her walk while she absorbed herself in thought. I’ve set up things as well as I can now. But some positive reassurance never hurt.

Then the small form of Ryouta appeared outside of Kyosuke’s door. He looked the same as always: a dreary expression full of insomnia, insecure body language, and the same air of seclusion. The moment he spotted Chisa, a dull smile appeared. “Oh, how are you Ms. Yukizome?”

“Good, my dear. Did you have some business with the vice chairman? I can wait.”

“No, I just finished up before you got here.”

“That so? You don’t visit Chiaki and the other’s much anymore. They really enjoy your company, you know?”

“Hehe, I’ve been preoccupied with other matters. I meant to see Nanami, though. After surviving Ikusaba and getting the vice chairman to not punish her after she attacked, she’s become like a folk hero around here. It’s inspiring how far she’s come.”

“I never had any doubt. But…I hear you’ve been up to some interesting things too.”

Ryouta was somewhat of an enigma in the organization, rarely ever coming out from his office. There were rumors of what he and Kazuo collaborated on. The chairman assured it’d be for the good of the organization and no one cared to question it. Even Kyosuke didn’t know the activities of the animator in full outside of his division duties.

Naturally, Chisa already knew what their meetings were about since they, too, were a part of the game.

Putting up a finger with a strong expression, Chisa said, “You’d better be getting your necessary eight hours, young man. Can’t expect to enjoy work if you’re always exhausted.”
He rubbed the back of his head, a guilty chuckle escaping. “Sorry, as I mentioned, I’ve been busy with lots of things lately. I’ll try to manage my hours better.”

“Your project with chairman taking a lot out of you?”

Ryouta scanned the ground with his eyes, the word “indecision” practically hanging over his head. “Say, Ms. Yukizome, I know Despair is on the decline…but does that really mean we’re winning? Mukuro Ikusaba herself almost got away with Chiaki, and Junko Enoshima may be out there… I…” Ryouta gulped. “I don’t want to meet that woman ever again…”

“It’s true Ikusaba took us by surprise, but—as the head of all information—I’ve seen no evidence of Junko Enoshima being alive.” Chisa concealed a smile. “But let’s say she did return… What would you do? Maybe you’d seek revenge for the last time?”

“I… I don’t know. I did those terrible things for her, putting you and everyone else in danger. I’d like to think I’d stand up to her like Naegi, but even so…” Ryouta clenched his fists, frustration etched across his face. “I don’t know if what I’m considering doing is the right thing…”

*Someone needs a pep talk.* Chisa swiftly took a step forward before planting her hands on Ryouta’s shoulder’s, staring into his startled eyes.

“I understand your hesitation considering how things went in the past, but people can change. Look at how far Chiaki has come. If you want to become strong, if you want to get revenge on Junko Enoshima, if you want to become a symbol of hope like Naegi did…then you must sacrifice everything for the sake of hope! At the end of the day, hope is always better than despair, right?”

Ryouta looked back at her for a few seconds, eyes shifting around. “Y-yeah… you’re right… Despair can’t exist because it only causes pain and suffering. But, still—” After shaking his head, Ryouta bowed and walked off. “Thank you for the talk, Ms. Yukizome.”

Chisa waved. “Anytime. And remember to contact Chiaki about the party. It’s sure to be a something special!”

Chisa put her hand on the doorknob to Kyosuke room before glancing at Ryouta’s back, a mischievous smirk visible. *That’s why I love Chiaki… People like Ryouta make it a little too easy sometimes. Really takes the sport out of it.*
Chisa put on her friendly face before entering Kyosuke’s room. Like always, she wanted to announce her presence with a friendly hello but furrowed her brow when she saw Kyosuke on his laptop. “Busted, mister!”

Kyosuke sighed while Chisa ripped the laptop away and closed it. “I was just checking on some things is all.”

“The priority is healing. I know you’re programmed to always move at a hundred miles per hour, but at least try to relax. Honestly, you could’ve lost both arms and you’d still want to work fifteen hours a day.”

Kyosuke sat back on his pillow, a far-off look on his face. “Keeping my mind busy has become a meditation for me. I’ve gone through enough books to fill a library since being here.” He gestured to the large stack of books near his bedside. Chisa doubted most humans have read that much in a lifetime.

Chisa sat by his bedside. “You don’t have to be the greatest at everything. Though, you’re the only person I’ve met that could make a go at it.”

“My dear old dad would be proud.”

Chisa slipped off her heels, feet aching from all the walking she did today. “So, what did you and Mitarai talk about if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Just updating me on some things in his division and giving his best wishes for my health. Honestly, there are times he’s so absent, I forget he’s a part of this organization.”

“He barely talks to me and Chiaki anymore either. Maybe the trauma of seeing Ikusaba triggered something in him, poor thing.” Chisa crossed her legs, deciding to press the issue she came here for. “And he’s not the only division leader acting odd.”

“Referring to Chairman Tengan, I’m guessing?”

“Hehe, so I’m not the only one. He’s been acting very odd lately; distancing himself more than
ever, pushing some aggressive policies, and he just doesn’t—how should I say it—come off the same.”

“I’ve been thinking the same for a while too. At first, I thought the workload he’s handling for someone his age was getting to him, but I don’t think that’s it. I don’t know why, but he’s showing more cynicism than he ever has.”

“You think we should move the notion to temporarily dismiss him? He could simply have a lot on his mind. And… I’m a little worried.”

Kyosuke raised his eyebrows in interest. “Have you heard anything?”

“No, no, I’m not suggesting anything extreme. It’s just a feeling I have.” The vice chairman stared down likely thinking on what Chisa said. What the housekeeper aimed for was support of her worried feeling over the Chairman.

But instead of paranoia, Kyosuke surprised her when he said, “Your gut is often accurate, but I can’t take action against him when he’s done nothing wrong. It won’t sit well with the organization if we reassign the chairman based on a whim.”

*My, did Chiaki shock his brain too?* Chisa giggled. “You’ve become quite mellow as of late.”

Closing his eyes, he said, “Forgive me if I’m hesitant in acting rashly after almost losing my legs the last time I did.”

“Still…we must be wary if any unfortunate developments concerning the chairman. We’ve gotten so far with the Future Foundation, but the balances of power can easily tilt. We failed to catch Junko Enoshima in time…and I never want to let a failure like that happen again…” Chisa hugged her shoulders, trembling. “I-I can’t lose anyone else…”

The warm hand of Kyosuke touched her shoulder. “It won’t, Yukizome. If the chairman—if anyone—proves they’re on the side of despair, we’ll deal with them without prejudice. For now, we’ll keep an eye out.”

Chisa wrapped her arms around Kyosuke, sobbing onto his chest. Despite the tears, she chuckled. “Heh, seems I still can’t get either you or Chiaki to call me Chisa.” She received no answer from
the recuperating vice chairman as the two fell into the warm silence of their embrace.

All the while, Chisa couldn’t contain her wide grin.

VVV

Luckily, since Kyosuke transferred to the main base for his convalesce, Chisa’s next trip would only take minutes at the most. The final person she ventured to talk to in person was the chairman himself.

After saying her goodbyes to Kyosuke, she rode the elevator to the top floor. Reaching her floor, she walked to his office doors, entering to find the chairman sitting at his desk with his appointed bodyguard Gozu by his side.

With a big huff, Gozu said, “Ah, Yukizome, how are you?”

“I’m great Gozu, hehe, no pun intended. Mind if we chat in private, Tengan?”

Adjusting his glasses, Kazuo said, “Right, I got your message saying you wanted to talk. Give us a minute, Gozu.” After nodding, the burly wrestler left the two alone.

“Forgive me if I look tired,” said Chisa, sitting across from Kazuo. “I’ve been moving quite a lot today.”

Kazuo smiled modestly. “Nice to hear you’re working hard as usual. You should give it your all while you’re still young.”

“You’ve been rather active as of late too, though… Tell me: Have what you and Mitarai been working moving along productively?”

The old man’s smile faded somewhat. “I see… So, you know what he’s working on?”

“I’ve expected it for quite some time, yes. It wasn’t until after I informed you of the weapon that
aided Junko Enoshima in starting the Tragedy.” Chisa tilted her head, smiling. “Again, I must thank you for not convicting Mitarai after finding out it was his work. I’m still very protective.”

“Then I assume Mitarai’s the one who told about the project?”

“Nope, I just figured it out. After thinking about it, a question came to me: Why would you want to keep Mitarai’s secret? It could simply be compassion…or perhaps you’ve found some use in his talent.”

The two shared silence for a moment before the chairman sat back in his chair, his expression suggesting admiration. “Hmm, maybe Kirigiri isn’t the best detective after all. Yes, it does have something to do with the despair video. One goal I have is to—”

Chisa put a hand up. “Say no more.” The housekeeper put on a melancholy face. “Lately, I’ve feared for the future of this organization. Sure, we’re winning, but I can see the cracks on the surface. There are people in the organization just waiting to use to opportunity to further themselves. It’s as if…some of them are becoming Despair’s as well…”

Chisa halted her speech—anticipating Kazuo wanting to interject—but when he didn’t, she continued. “What I’m saying is, do what you have to. While I’ve even lost some faith in Kyosuke and Juzo, you’re always the wise moral compass. So, I know no matter what happens, you’ll always act with the intent to lead hope over despair. I offer my full support.”

Once again, Kazuo simply stared back at her. The housekeeper said all she wanted; now she waited for a response she could work with. The chairman’s lack of emotion made her wonder if she played it on too thick.

Finally, after clearing his throat, he said, “Is that all you had to say?”

Chisa put her head down. “Yes, sir.”

“… Lately, I’ve been plagued by a conundrum. In long struggles like ours, the enemy always has one face above the rest. But…I still don’t know who’s face that is. Could it be the Remnants of Despair, maybe Ikusaba, or perhaps the only conductor behind the scenes was Junko Enoshima all along, and everything else has been clean-up.”
“Well, I can’t speak to that, but I’m sure we’ll find out soon.” After rising, brushing herself off, and then bowing—Chisa had said all she needed to. “Keep me posted, Chairman Tengan,” she said before heading towards the exit.

“It’s fascinating…” murmured Kazuo, causing Chisa to halt her exit. “The way you seamless adapt to everything is unparalleled. Fitting since back when I met you on your first day of Hope’s Peak Academy—you always had a certain…luster around you.”

With her back facing him, she said, “How very kind, but I—”

“Although…I’d argue your prudence has been almost too accurate at times. Maybe, just maybe…the real conductor’s closer than anyone thought…”

What was he thinking right now? The housekeeper tried to hazard a guess, his face a mystery to her since she didn’t face him. She planned to stretch the strings that were the cooperation between the branch leaders until it almost snapped; though, it seemed to make her more suspicious in the old man’s mind.

Perhaps he did catch on to her, but it mattered little. The chairman was one person she didn’t mind suspecting her because his priorities would aid her. And she knew him suspecting her would alter his plans very little, especially since she announced her cooperation with the matter.

Still, being too stark might complicate things later, so Chisa forced down the malicious grin threatening consume her face, and glanced behind to her. “Sorry, I’m nothing special… At my core, I’m just a simple housekeeper.”

Chisa advanced out of the room, not willing to wait for a rebuttal if there was one or add anything to the statements she made. Instead, she headed to her last destination for today where she’d wait for the final person she needed to meet.

VVV

Just like my dreams, my memories became corrupted as well. The joyous feelings I remember have twisted, turning into a bile desire to imagine them turning chaotic and violent. The times with Kyosuke and Juzo, the days with my class: Most of them had soured like a virus corrupting a hard drive.
However, some remained unchanged, and there was one I’d think about for some reason…

Chisa, fifteen-years-old, laid face down on her bed. She arrived home from school earlier, the day warm and sunny, and dropped onto her bed the moment she reached it. After a long day, the peacefulness of her room always made things better.

She took care of her western-style room every day; her mother made sure of that. It’s floor and walls clean, and a scent of pine, orange, or strawberry wafted through the air depending on her preference that day. It acted as a microcosm of the whole house. She loved when her mother would dare visitors to find one speck of dust anywhere; they never did.

“Long day, Chisa?” said the gentle voice of her mother, standing in the doorway with a smile. Her features were young and so similar like Chisa’s, people would often confuse them for sisters. She had her auburn hair, emerald eyes, and even her cleanliness tendencies.

“Yeah… Gosh, it seems every time you get through one big pile of work, a bigger pile is waiting for you.”

“Hehe, that’s how it goes. Luckily, you’re so smart—near the top of your whole class—and you’ve got such great work ethic. Pretty much any major university is yours for the picking. Well… assuming that doesn’t interest you.”

When her mom said, “that,” she pointed to the white letter sitting on Chisa’s desk. She received it two weeks ago, and couldn’t believe her eyes. It was none other than an official invitation to Hope’s Peak Academy. Chisa didn’t realize at the time, but the odd stranger she met in the fedora must’ve been a scout.

Grumbling, mouth partly over her pillow, Chisa said, “Eh, I don’t know if Ultimate Housekeeper is something to strive for… What kind of career would I have with something like that?”

Her mom sat on the edge of her bed. “Believe me, you could be the Ultimate Dust Collector and if you pass Hope’s Peak final exam—you’ll be set for life. Their success rate with alumni in the workforce is starling to the point most wealthy families almost demand their children go to receive an inheritance. The fact a small-town kid like you got picked is unbelievably fortunate.”

“I do love cleaning, but you know what I really want to do.”
Her mother nodded, grinning. “Just because you go as the Ultimate Housekeeper, doesn’t mean you can become a teacher; they both do with caretaking.” Her mother’s eyes lit up as she put up a finger. “You could even be a teacher at Hope’s Peak Academy!”

Gasping, Chisa sat up, the possibility dawning on her. Teaching normal students sounded great, but teaching Ultimates had to be an even more special experience. She crossed her legs, mulling it over before she pumped her fists. “Okay, Mom! I think I’m gonna do it!”

Giggling she said, Fantastic. Who knows? You might find a favorite and take him or her on as your little protégé. You always said you wanted to do that”

“All I want to do is help teach and inspire people to be all they can be! Just the thought of having my own classroom excites me so much I could explode!”

In pure excitement, Chisa hopped up before jumping up and down on her bed, smiling ear to ear. Her joy in these moments was enough to let her forget her mom didn’t like this kind of horseplay.

But the occasion must’ve been to grand because her mother laughed. “If this is how you’ll act, you’ll have a class full of rotten oranges.”

“Ha-ha, I’ll get through Hope’s Peak Academy, become a teacher, then I’ll love and protect my students no matter what!”

VVV

Chisa eyes snapped open, her daydream reaching its conclusion. In contrast to her brightly lit, pleasant room in the past—she was resting in her dim apartment. The rain stopped, but the late hours made it dark. But this time, Chisa laid on her back, the ceiling the only thing in her vision. The memory of her deciding to go to Hope’s Peak Academy, while the feelings of happiness weren’t there like before, she didn’t twist it to fit her despair cravings.

Even thinking of her mom—who was missing, which was fortunate for her since Chisa would’ve done something “fun” to her—in those moments didn’t invoke those feelings. And the housekeeper wasn’t sure why. Of course, her mind worked in the oddest ways now. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing a different reflection each time.
Biting her lip, the housekeeper rose, standing on the bed. Then she hopped up and down like she did that day. She did this for a full minute, waiting for any kind of reaction. Perhaps a smile or a giggle would escape…but no. Like always, those feelings didn’t come back.

Chisa stopped hopping, and stared blankly at the wall before willingly falling, her head hitting the pillow. “… It seems that really is gone forever, huh?”

Then Chisa smiled, not because of the memory or the fact she’d never enjoy it again—but because of the figure standing at her window. Like always, he wore his crisp suit, his long hair partly concealing those piercing crimson eyes.

Sitting up, Chisa said, “It’s not polite to watch a lady in her room like that. So…how did your date go?”
Save the Inquisition

Chiaki hastened along the sidewalk, the sound of thunder in the distance. She struggled to keep her energy high since she hadn’t slept much lately. In between visiting all the division leaders, convincing them to join her party, and her work for the Future Foundation, the image of her laying on a bed made her drowsy. How Ryouta lived this way every day, she couldn’t fathom.

As it stood, the only division leaders left to convince were Ruruka—as well as Izayoi since they were obviously a packaged deal—Kyoko, Juzo, and Kazuo. The chairman and Kyoko would be simple, Juzo would probably come just because of his friend returning, and Ruruka… That’d be interesting. If it was like VEIL, she’d have to start cleaning for her next.

But today, the gamer took a break from that, focusing on a task given to her by Chisa. The duo talked much less these days, so hearing one of Chisa’s orders offered some sour nostalgia. According to her, something suspicious was in the area outside an abandoned city. She’d be doing this alone, or a better way to say it would be Chisa didn’t want anyone else there.

Right now, she walked on the outskirts of the abandoned city, headed towards an area with lots of trees. Traveling through the woods reminded her of the climatic time with Mukuro. She couldn’t help but check over her shoulder for any hunters.

If Ms. Yukizome wanted me out here alone…maybe there is something like that waiting for me, she thought. But why would—

Once Chiaki got through the small woods, the area opened into a stunning sight. In front of her rested an amusement park, or at least the remnants of one as the broken-down rides and foliage growing over objects suggested. The gray sky overhead complimented the dreary look. A symbol of merriment like an amusement park abandoned and broken down is something a Despair would enjoy.

Death mazes, despair carnivals, a crazy woman’s castle, abandoned amusement parks… Why can’t it ever be an arcade or a pillow factory? Chiaki reluctantly entered the abandoned park, on the lookout for any funny business.

The park wasn’t super extravagant, only modest in its size. It featured the staples of any amusement park: merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels, roller coasters, etc. The gamer visited amusement parks only when she took trips with her class, so it brought back fond memories. The sounds of happy jingles and laughter, the smells of hot food, the busy scene of people having a good time—it’s an experienced she wished could happen again after things calm down.
But the abandoned park in front of her had none of those things. It mirrored the image of Hope Peak Academy, a husk of what it used to be, a perfect setting for the Tragedy. As sad as it was, working for the Future Foundation normalized her to this kind of scenery, a picture only someone like Junko could love.

Chiaki drifted through the amusement park, searching for anything suspicious. Her orders were only to patrol the area for any Despairs. Chisa gave no orders to apprehend or investigate, but only to search the grounds for anything suspicious. What “something suspicious” meant to Chisa could be many things. But Chiaki’s search turned up nothing odd so far.

She spent an hour combing the park, finding nothing but old discarded trash, no signs of Despairs or other suspicious activity. In frustration, the gamer stared upward, her feet tired, a light drizzle beginning to fall. She could be inside, warm and playing her game, but instead the housekeeper made her search for a ghost.

“What am I looking for, Ms. Yukizome?” Sighing, Chiaki took out her phone, intent on contacting the housekeeper. “I doubt I’ll get a clear answer, but I need to—”

Chiaki jumped when she heard a strange sound. It took her a moment to realize the source: the merry-go-round next to her roared to life, a jolly tune coming from its speakers as bright lights shinned from it. Following suit were most of the rides in the park, roaring to life as the once dark area became bright with artificial illumination. *This place is operational?*

She put a hand on VEIL, eyes scanning everywhere they could. Her heartbeat hastened, the vision of a nasty surprise jumping out at her prevalent. Somebody turned on the power, which meant she wasn’t alone in this park. And, as the theme of her life since awakening went, situations like this meant trouble. No one was there at first…

And then she turned around, spotting him.

The sounds around her drowned out, the feeling of the rain colliding against her skin faded—the only thing in the world was the person meters across from her. The bright lights of the park revealed who they were… Chiaki’s mouth hung open as she saw the person in front of her for the first time since her “death.”

“Izuru… Kamakura…” she murmured. The drizzle made his hair conceal his eyes. When he swiped it aside, Chiaki took a step back, his crimson gaze piercing. They were the same eyes she saw upon
meeting him the first time, the same eyes she saw after her execution, the same eyes in her dreams and nightmares… The same eyes that used to belong to Hajime Hinata.

Chiaki pushed down her anxiety, attempting to force her words out. “D-do you…remember who I am?”

He stared back at her, his eyes so unmoving she wasn’t sure if he knew how to blink. But then he said, “… I do, Chiaki Nanami.”

After hearing him, she calmed down. Aside from if he concealed something in his closed fist, he didn’t have any weapons. Of course, if his abilities were true, he didn’t need them. Even so, Chiaki didn’t feel any malicious intent. Then what was he here for? And why did Chisa want them meeting? Chiaki opened her mouth to ask a question but stopped because she had a hundred. Where should she start? Better yet, did Izuru even care to answer any of them? An air of mystery surrounded him, but there was something Chiaki knew—this man saved her life.

“Tell me,” said Chiaki, a hand to her chest, “why did you save my life that day? If Hinata really is gone and you don’t care about me…then why bother? Ms. Yukizome said that you cried… Just… what am I to you?” Chiaki intended to ask a single question, but two more slipped out. Izuru didn’t seem annoyed; as always, his unmoving scowl faced her.

Finally, he said, “My reasoning is for my own interest. That day when tears fell, I was confused. Within you lies the unpredictability Junko Enoshima promised and failed to deliver in any meaningful amount.”

Chiaki hung her head, expecting that answer since Chisa echoed it before, but still disappointed. She hoped part of Hajime stood across from her. But no, just like Chisa, he acted in his own interest regardless of what Chiaki wanted. “So then…there really is nothing of Hinata left? There was no other reason you wanted to save me…?”

“… As I said when you asked in the past, I have no recollection of my former self. Whatever feelings the one called Hajime Hinata held for you, I do not know.”

Without thinking, she asked, “Then what does Junko Enoshima mean to you?” Huh? thought Chiaki, realizing what she asked. Why did I ask that?

“Junko Enoshima is the one who showed me unpredictability, for a short time. That woman holds
no purpose other than being a tool for discord. Other than that, she’s boring.”

Chiaki grinned a little. From the tone of his voice, he didn’t seem fond of Junko. Chisa said Kamakura didn’t like Junko either, but now she believed it. It surprised her how happy it made her; it’s not like Hajime said it. “Why did you leave me with Ms. Yukizome? If you can do anything, why not take me yourself?”

“Me taking you would not have been as optimal. Leaving you with the current Chisa Yukizome allows for a more unpredictable outcome in this game of hope and despair.”

That made her anger rise again. There he was with the same kind of rhetoric Chisa repeated ad nauseum about this all-important game. Again, she didn’t know why she had these unrealistic expectations of Izuru caring about her beyond his own agenda. They only talked twice up to this point,

But her temper fumed nonetheless, and she couldn’t help but raise her voice. “Whether it’s you, Chisa, or Junko, the only thing that matters is your own interests! You could’ve saved everyone like I begged you to that day, but you didn’t even care! Isn’t there a part of you that wanted to save me because of something more! Isn’t…isn’t there a part of you that still cares…!”

Chiaki let her exclamations hang in the air, panting from shouting as loud as she could. She couldn’t stare at him, her eyes settled on the moist ground. Again, she failed to bottle her influx of emotions. Izuru was a stranger, but she yelled as if it was Hajime himself standing across from her. And that led to a question she had since awakening.

“Why…why did you do this to yourself…? Was I a bad friend…? Did I not make you feel like you mattered…? Please, just…say something to me…Hinata…” She waited for something—anything that’d prove a sliver of that boy she knew stood across from her, proving the real reason he saved her came from more than his urge to act on a whim.

Instead, the usual toneless voice of Izuru said, “I possess none of the memories or desires of my original self. Based on how you describe the one called Hajime Hinata, I can only surmise he felt inferior enough to want to abolish himself. My reason for saving you after Junko Enoshima’s execution was based on my own interest, not a bond you had in the past with another version of me.”

“If that’s true,” she murmured, picking her head up some, “then why did you cry that day…?”
“I don’t know.”

If what Izuru felt confused even him, a being made of nothing but pure talent, then perhaps hope existed. The way Izuru commented wasn’t his usual concise answer, but rather he truly seemed like the phenomenon mystified him. Narrowing her eyes, Chiaki said, “… If you’re here, then you want something from me. Just what are you and Ms. Yukizome planning?”

“Since you’re awakening, I’ve been keeping up with your feats against those who seek to preserve Junko Enoshima’s legacy.”

“So, the time against Takara, Mukuro, and a bunch of others… You were there every time.”

“Not every time. When I had other matters to attend to, I’d have the series of events relayed to me. I evaluated your progress and how Chisa Yukizome was carrying out the task I left her with. As far as my prognostic abilities go, there were only two times the outcome defied what I thought would happen.”

“And those were?”

“I did not expect you to break free of Kitta Takara’s brainwashing, and I didn’t expect Mukuro Ikusaba to shield you with her own body.”

He was watching me? Chiaki couldn’t recall a time she saw or heard about him from any of her subordinates. Then again, the super stealth of a ninja or secret agent probably was in him as well. But…there was the possibility Chiaki saw Izuru and didn’t know it was him. The man with Junko’s head for a helmet crossed her mind. Was he Enigma the whole time…? “So now what?” asked Chiaki. “Why did you want to reveal yourself now?”

Finally, Izuru broke his gaze, looking off into the distance. “Since leaving you with Chisa Yukizome, I’ve allowed whatever events that crossed your path to happen with impunity, and twice you’ve provided the unpredictability Junko Enoshima promised. Unlink her, however, for some reason, I haven’t lost interest in you yet. In a short time, I’ll be entering this game as well as the Remnants of Despair so hope and despair can clash once more.”

Chiaki gasped. “You mean my former classmates! What are you all planning?”
“That will progress in just a few days. As for today”—Izuru redirected his crimson gaze at her —“I’ve come to test the seed I entrusted to Chisa Yukizome.” Without another word, Izuru turned before walking out of sight behind one of the amusement park concession stands.

“Wait!” yelled Chiaki, giving chase. “I still have questions!” When she reached the concession stand, Izuru was nowhere in sight. Confused, she scanned around until she spotted him several meters in the other direction where she previously stood. *How did he move that fast!*

Chiaki continued the goose chase all over the amusement park. Every time she arrived where she saw him, Izuru magically appeared in another position. Just as she’d catch a glimpse, he’d disappear behind another object and the cycle would continue anew. The artificial Ultimate Hope wanted her in a specific area she guessed.

She didn’t know what to do after catching him. If he didn’t want to answer her question or do worse, what could she do? If fighting Mukuro was akin to a level one character fighting a level ninety-nine boss, then going against Izuru would be like fighting against a boss where your loss was pre-developed into the game. It just wasn’t supposed to happen.

Even so, she couldn’t stop her pursuit. Her desire to know the truth from the man she met on the day she “died” meant too much. He might not have been Hajime, he might not be her friend, but he had the answers she wanted. So, she ran through the bright amusement park, the drizzle beginning to turn into a heavy rain.

“Where are you leading me, Kamakura?” whispered Chiaki to herself. Once Izuru entered a building, Chiaki followed haste, happy to get out of the rain. The lights overhead blared as a long staircase led downward. Izuru disappeared again, but only one way down existed so Chiaki jogged down the stairs.

After reaching the bottom, Izuru remained unseen. Chiaki traveled through a narrow hall, listening for any movement. When she turned, the gamer put her hand on VEIL once she saw someone across from her. However, after calming down, she realized it was simply her own reflection in a mirror. Mirrors were everywhere as far as the eye could see.

“A hall of mirrors,” said Chiaki. She visited a hall of mirrors once in the past with her class. A bunch of shenanigans ensued, but the gamer barely took in the collection of mirrors since her eyes were on a game that came out the previous day. As usual, her lack of experience spoke for itself.

“Where did you go…?” In no time, Chiaki realized the huge annoyance of navigating this place. Not only was it a maze, but every time she thought a glimpse of Izuru entered her peripheral, it
turned out to be her reflection. Izuru didn’t let out as little as a peep, her own breaths echoed in the dead silence of the area. *No wonder they use this place so much in horror games.*

After minutes of searching, she still couldn’t find Izuru. Was he even still in the hall of mirrors? She decided to call out to him since he likely knew her location already. “Kamakura? Are you in here?”

“I am,” he answered, surprising Chiaki because she didn’t expect him to answer back.

*I still can’t tell where he is.* “What kind of test is this?”

“In this hall of mirrors, you are to find me, then lay a finger on me.”

Chiaki raised an eyebrow. “Wait…so, this is a game of tag?”

“If you can touch me with VEIL, ever for a split second, it’ll give me accurate foresight as to your fate in the upcoming game.”

*How would that prove anything?* She chalked this up to something only a being like him would understand. Regardless, a more important predicament lay in front of her. Maybe one greater than anything she faced before this.

How in the world would she touch him with VEIL?

As alluded to earlier, Izuru could beat Mukuro, who was an absolute monster. When the Ultimate Soldier slept, the gamer never tried anything since she knew her life would end in a second. With Izuru, every stratagem seemed useless. He could, literally, see her coming from a mile away if he wanted. Even if she could clone herself, she’d still never hit him.

She only saw one avenue of hope because of what Izuru said earlier. She defied his expectations two times. Granted, she didn’t have a clue how, but her opportunity awaited in making that happen a third time.

Now, as she was combing the labyrinth of mirrors for Izuru’s whereabouts, the gamer had a few
more questions. “Kamakura, are you Enigma?” Seconds passed and…no answer. “… What was your role in the Tragedy?”

“An observer to Junko Enoshima’s ploy to plunge the world into the Tragedy. She showed me that despair can bring upon unpredictability, so I watched for anything that would surprise me during the fall of Hope’s Peak Academy.”

“Then, you really didn’t murder the student council, or help Junko with infecting my friends with Despair.”

“I remained a neutral party as to see what despair had to offer.”

Chiaki took a breath of relief. While him not helping saddened her, hearing he didn’t actively aid Junko in her task relived her. “The rumor of you killing them was a lie after all.”

“Yes, Junko Enoshima conducted the entire event. She used me.”

Izuru tone contained the same venom it did whenever Junko came up. The gamer speculated before, but now she was sure: He shared her hatred for the evil fashionista. This raised her spirits even more. “Why do you want me to be in this game? Naegi not only defeated Junko himself but also got the public to call him Ultimate Hope. Those are two things I’ve never done and never will do.”

“While it’s true Makoto Naegi defeated Junko Enoshima in the mutual killing game and earned the title of Ultimate Hope, the same things apply to the hope he exudes as it did with Junko Enoshima’s despair. They both provided their moments of volatility, but in the end—neither held my attention for long. They were boring; you are different.”

Chisa echoed the same thing, explaining how she differed from what Makoto was. And in that difference, held what Junko feared in her. The chairman also voiced his interest in her unique mindset. Honestly, Kyosuke assertion of her was more fitting. Ever since awakening, she felt like nothing more than a gamer with no real direction, thrust into situations she didn’t ask to be in.

“Was…was Junko afraid of me…?”

“It’s more accurate to claim you were an existence even she couldn’t grasp fully. While I don’t
think fear was on her conscious mind, on an unconscious level—yes, you being alive is something she didn’t want at that time.”

Chiaki turned another corner, more reflections of herself staring back at her, Izuru’s words heavy on her mind. “But if she viewed me as a threat, then she should’ve killed me in my execution, I think. Why did she rig it to where I wouldn’t die right away?”

“Because by the time your execution had come, another part of Junko Enoshima desired to keep you alive despite her internal warning to kill you. She struggled internally with the decision in a way I can’t fully grasp.”

The question she wanted to ask above all hung on her lips. “But…why? Why be afraid of me of all people above you, Naegi, and the Future Foundation? And if she was, what made her not want to kill me…? I don’t understand it at all…”

To her dismay, Izuru didn’t give an answer. Yet again, she found another question he didn’t want answered, or perhaps the inner workings of Junko’s mind are something beyond even the being of pure talent. Chiaki gulped after taking a turn, face-to-face with Izuru; he stood about ten meters away. He stood in the middle a dead end that formed a circular space of mirrors.

“…Before we do this, tell me: After this reaches the end, what are you going to do?”

“I foresee many possible outcomes, but I will not exist as my current self in any of them.”

Chiaki covered her mouth, a thought burning itself into her mind. “Wait, d-do you m-mean…”

As if he read her mind, Izuru said, “In order for the game to proceed, I’ll need to abolish the identity if Izuru Kamakura and become Hajime Hinata once again.”

“Then…I’ll get to see him again?”

“Perhaps.”

Chiaki smiled, the image of that event bringing feelings of joy. Of course, with this news, the
nature of this “game” seemed that much more ominous, but the gamer took a moment to enjoy the possibility of them meeting again. In her mind, she long accepted the two would never meet again.

“So,” said Chiaki, glancing at Izuru with a determined expression, “all I have to do is touch you with VEIL?”

“That is correct.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Then you’ve already lost the game.”

Chiaki still didn’t understand the point of this, but Izuru wasn’t emitting any malice—or at least she didn’t feel that from him. She didn’t doubt Izuru wanted to do this for this own interest. And if this somehow helped with her reuniting with everyone, she’d give a try. But there was still the issue: How could she ever hit Izuru Kamakura?

Luckily, as the questions and answers were flying back and forth, she thought of one maneuver. She happened to think of it since it was in a game once. Using her silent steps wasn’t an option, so the gamer would rely on a trick. If this didn’t work, she had nothing left.

“Okay,” she murmured, taking a deep breath. Chiaki visualized her plan one last time. It would last a few seconds at most, a minute margin of error. *Don’t think, just do!*

Then Chiaki ran at Izuru, loosening her arms out of her jacket. She pressed the code at extreme speed, activating VEIL. Izuru was a stone wall, not moving even though she had reached within inches of him. Chiaki extended her arm before Izuru vanished in the blink of an eye. After her goose chase through the amusement park, she expected that.

From behind her, Izuru said, “You’ll have to be fas—”

Chiaki threw her jacket at Izuru, redirecting his gaze for a split second. After he swatted her jacket away, the gamer reached out to touch him again, her right arm within inches of his chest. In a flash, he grabbed her arm…resulting in Chiaki smirking because that played right in her hands. *Got him!*
Next, she reached out her left arm, the arm she transferred VEIL to in the small window of time after she threw her jacket. It could’ve been her imagination, but Izuru eye’s widened once he became privy to her trick. It lasted for a moment, but Chiaki collided with his closed hand before he jumped back out of her range.

“All that,” said Chiaki, hands on her knees, drained from that intense clash, “and I only hit your hand. But I still managed to touch—”

She stopped when her eyes drifted to a shiny object on the ground. At first, she thought it was more garbage left behind from the amusement park’s glory days, but a closer look made her gasp. She recognized the plastic object on the ground because of how much it meant to her. It was her treasured Gala Omega hairclip or at least a replica of it.

“Is that…mine?” she asked as Izuru bent down and grabbed it. Chiaki lost her hairclip on the day she “died” and figured she’d never see it again. But witnessing Izuru grab it gave her a realization. “Have you been…holding it this whole time…?”

He didn’t respond at first. “You switched the hand your weapon was on and goaded me into grabbing you.”

“…Yeah, it’s a trick I thought of one time. I couldn’t do it again, I think. And…you held back, didn’t you? You can move way faster than you just did.”

“Regardless, once more, you’ve defied my expectation. However…” Izuru averted his eyes for a moment, a phenomenon in itself since Chiaki didn’t think he could ever be uncertain. “I’ve gauged your ability, and have come to a decision.”

“Yeah…?”

“When you face Junko Enoshima again”—Izuru stared into her eyes—“you will lose.”

“What…?” said Chiaki, wishing her ears deceived her. “Junko is alive…?”

Izuru turned away from her, walking away into the labyrinth of mirrors. Wanting desperately to have her questions answered, Chiaki ran after him. She traveled through the area, shouting his name, hoping he answered her pleas. But there wasn’t a response. He probably left the hall of
After an hour of searching, she exited the hall of mirrors, arriving back outside where the amusement park still roared with life under the rain. Once again, she didn’t see Izuru. She put her head down, realizing he had nothing more to say and left, her mind consumed with tons of thoughts. Izuru talking more about this “game,” her friends and Hajime returning, Junko being alive, and the being created of nothing but talent predicted another defeat for her.

“… What does it all mean…?” She murmured, staring into the dark heavens, hoping an answer would fall from them.

VVV

“My,” said Chisa, sitting with her legs crossed on the side of her bed, gazing at Izuru next to her apartment window, “what a time you had. And you think she won’t win?”

“Yes,” said Izuru. “As far as I can see, I do not predict a victory for Chiaki Nanami in the upcoming game.”

“Oh dear… that would make all of this work I’ve done a failure, wouldn’t it?” Chisa smirked. “But she’s proven you wrong three times now. What’s one more? Though, if she doesn’t win, you’ll be one with Enoshima. I bet that has to make even you feel despair.”

“I don’t feel any fear nor joy at whatever the results are. All I seek is to have my interest answer as to where unpredictability thrives in this boring world.”

“It’s always the same with you. I’m guessing you already know, but you’re aware of where the extraction zone will be and who’ll be there, right?”

“I do.”

“Excellent.” The housekeeper had a question she wanted to ask the artificial Ultimate Hope, one of the few questions she pondered. “Since we’re nearing the end and I’ve been a good little housekeeper, I have to know: Why did you want me to look after Chiaki? Seems dangerous to leave her with an insane woman.”
“Because like Chiaki Nanami, predicting your actions are more challenging than normal humans. With your mind the way it is, constantly swaying from hope to despair in an incalculable flux, I have trouble prognostication your abilities since I don’t have precedent with people like you. Realizing this, among other factors, you were the best candidate for her rehabilitation.”

Chisa chuckled, happy her first assertion correct after all. “How flattering. The whole ‘you’re not like other girls’ line is cliché, but hearing it from you is the ultimate confirmation.”

“I don’t see you keeping up your balancing at for much longer. The pull of despair will consume you. How you were able to function in an efficient manner for this long is as much of phenomenon as my own existence. Can you yourself even say what you really want?”

“Hehe, it’s as you said, I’m one of a kind. But since you ask…let me put it the best way I can…”

Chisa pounced to her feet, arms spread wide, smiling from ear-to-ear. “I am motivated by two wishes: to feel the ultimate despair, and to complete my revenge! Because, if Chiaki does indeed become what I want, the definitive validation of my existence will be fulfilled. And that’s because… I am the true composer of this game! Not you, not Junko, not anymore else—me! Everyone is a pawn on the chessboard I’ve carefully crafted! Yes…I will be the catalyst that leads all this to the end I saw the day my eyes rested on Chiaki’s comatose body!”

Once Chisa finished, Izuru studied her before going towards the window. “Truly, Chisa Yukizome…your existence is unlike any other. Even so, you still bore me.”

“Heh, sorry I’m not your darling gamer,” she said as Izuru jumped out of sight. “He really is such an enigma. Did I imagine it, or did I amuse him just now? Maybe he finally saw the ending I saw too…” Chisa flicked her auburn hair before smiling. “We’re nearly there…Chiaki.”
Makoto anxiously tapped his fingers against his pants as Kyoko drove them to a place of fond and not so fond memories—the once grand but now notorious Hope’s Peak Academy. Neither the Ultimate Hope nor the detective wanted to traverse the halls where their mutual killing game played out, but a special occasion changed their mind.

Not long ago, Makoto received a special message from more supposed survivors of Hope’s Peak Academy. They claimed the Future Foundation frightened them, a sentiment both Makoto and Kyoko understood, and that the only person they want to see is Makoto because of his famed victory over Junko. Makoto hesitated, aware of the potential trap this could be; however, if genuine in their plea for help—the guilt of leaving them to rot made him pursue it.

That led to asking Kyoko for permission to pursue his task while keeping it from the higher authority of the Future Foundation. Instead, Kyoko offered to accompany him since the sanctions put on her for disobeying Juzo finally expired. He felt bad for putting her reputation in harm’s way again, but the detective shrugged it off. Byakuya caught wind of their plans and offered to remain on standby in case something went awry.

Finally, once they arrived outside the campus, they stepped out the car, eyes peeled for any shady business. Their somber walk to the main building filled Makoto with memories of when he’d share this walk with his classmates—mostly the deceased pop idol Sayaka.

“I know I’ve said it a hundred times,” said Makoto, “but thanks for this Kirigiri. You could get in more trouble if anyone found out what we’re doing.”

“If you felt compelled enough, you’d come here all by yourself. Better I’m with you in that case. I owe you that much at least.”

Kyoko likely referred to when, literally, Makoto took the fall for her in the mutual killing game. Although she never expressed it—Kyoko’s stoic enough to never overtly express much of anything—that event stuck with her. “Hehe, it’s funny; we were classmates, yet we never did walk to class together, and I’m pretty sure I walked with everyone. Even, her…” He didn’t need to speak the name; who else would he refer to like that but the blond mastermind?

 “… Yes, I went to class alone most of the time. The only times I didn’t is when my father would force his company on me.” The detective developed a far-off look.
“Things were simpler back then. Get good grades, graduate, then look for a promising career. All that changed on the whims of one person. Because of her, all that’s left of our class is me, you Togami, Hina, Fukawa, and Hagakure.”

“And Mu—”

_Huh?_ thought Makoto, raising an eyebrow when Kyoko stopped speaking, looking as if she wanted to kick herself. “Something wrong?”

“No, sorry, I got lost in thought…”

Makoto let it go, knowing when Kyoko didn’t want to say something, it’s best not to press her. Instead, he focused on the task ahead. Once they reach the front doors of the main building, Makoto stopped in his tracks. According to the message, the survivors will be in the lobby. In other words, they’d see them on the others side of these doors.

“I know the answer probably won’t change,” said Kyoko, “but are you sure this is what’s best?”

Makoto nodded. “Yes, I can’t ignore people who may be in trouble. If there’s any sign of danger, we’ll run and give up on them. Promise.”

After a look of approval from Kyoko, Makoto opened the doors. A quick sense of nostalgia fell over him, overlooking the lobby he ventured through every day to get to class. But those feelings quickly turned to panic. There were fourteen individuals, all with their eyes closed. They sat side-by-side on their knees as if they were surrendering.

Where to even start explaining this scene? They each wore different garbs, everyone distinct from the other. Makoto rubbed his eyes when he saw one dressed like Byakuya, only much huskier. At this point, he considered this a prank by teens to get a laugh over gullible Future Foundation agents.

But the very atmosphere among them felt ghastly, almost suffocating so. There might as well have been a pack of ravenous dogs in front of him, waiting to tear anything in front of it to shreds. Not since Junko Enoshima herself did Makoto have this underlying sense of dread. He knew right then: these guys were Despairs, _major_ ones.
Makoto almost forgot Kyoko who remained silent as he did. She had an expression of shock, a hand placed over her mouth and pale eyes wide. *Does she know who they are?*

Before Makoto could question her, one of the kneeling figures rose, approaching them until he stood a few meters away, his snow-white draped over his pale face. “Greetings, Makoto Naegi, or perhaps Ultimate Hope would be more fitting. I’d love to chat because how big of a fan I am of your work, but that’s not why we’ve all gathered here. We asked you to come here to save us.”

The man across from him seemed polite on the outside, but it reminded him of Celestia—masking his true self. “… And who exactly are all of you?”

On cue, all the kneeling figures open their eyes, their haunting stares striking Makoto like a round of bullets. Smiling, he said, “We are Junko Enoshima’s will, the Remnants of Despair.”

The Ultimate Hope gulped, his fears confirmed. “If you’re Despairs, why do you want my help?”

The white-haired boy developed a sad look. “Because our despair isn’t our fault… Junko Enoshima brainwashed us, forcing us to become her part of her twisted following. But after all this time, we’ve begun to understand something clearly. We cannot atone fully, but we still wish to become our former selves.” He got on his knees and hands. “So please… take us to the Neo World Program so that we may reclaim our past selves!”

Makoto’s mind spun like mad. “Neo World Program…?”

He jumped when he felt something forcibly grab his arm. It turned out to be Kyoko. “We’d like to discuss this briefly. If you try anything, back-up will arrive at the press of a button.”

The white-haired boy’s polite smiled returned. “Please, discuss as you like. As I said, all we want is to reclaim our true identities. And that’s why we called the Ultimate Hope himself. The Future Foundation doesn’t get it, but you do. You know forgiveness because you are hope. So please, Makoto Negi, help those who’ve had their hope forcibly taken from us.”

“T-that’s…” The detective pulled him away, leading them back outside away from the morbid presence of the Remnants of Despair.

Kyoko crossed her arms, her eyes scanning the ground. Makoto knew that look. Her brain moved
at lightning speed right now, working out scenario after scenario. Finally, she said, “I know what you’re thinking, Naegi. This isn’t a matter you should pursue.”

He predicted that response. Honestly, common sense told him to escape now and leave those Despairs. But still… “I know, Kirigiri…but if they truly need help, I can’t just leave them. They’re surrendering themselves and isn’t brainwashing something the Future Foundation is looking into? Only thing is, I have no clue what the Neo Word Program is, though…”

“It’s a program meant to rehabilitate Despairs. The project isn’t complete, however. The fact they know is even more suspicious considering only select people are aware of it. And there’s still another revelation I’ve made that’s made me rethink everything I’ve assumed until now…”

“What do you mean?”

“The boy you just talked to goes by the name Nagito Komaeda. Not only that, everyone you saw used to be a student here. And the most notable part is they were class 77-B—the class Chisa Yukizome taught and Nanami attended…”

Makoto gasped. Thinking back, he remembered Chiaki expressing concern over her missing class. “That settles it, Kirigiri! There’s no way we can walk away from this! We have a chance to unite Nanami with her classmates. This is amazing!’

“You’re right, it’s too amazing. They claimed Enoshima used brainwashing, turning them into Despairs. And then there’s Chiaki’s strange case and the fact Yukizome supposedly knew nothing of it. Now here they are with knowledge of a classified project. Something isn’t right here… There’s more to this than just Despairs wishing to repent.”

“Then what? You think Nanami and Yukizome set this up for some nefarious scheme? I thought you and Nanami were close after that mission to arrest Kitta Takara?”

“We are; it’s Yukizome I’m suspicious of, but now I’m not sure of Nanami’s role in this either…” Kyoko rubbed her temples, clearly aggravated by his situation. “Look, I know where your heart is on this, Naegi, but if we pursue this…nothing good will come of it. We need to call Togami to send reinforcements and have them apprehended.”

Makoto stared at the ground, absorbing Kyoko concerns. Typically, in Makoto’s experience, most of what Kyoko said happened some way. If her powerful detective intuition told her this situation
is a no-go, the lucky student couldn’t counter. But once again, his judgment pulled him in a different way. Back there, he saw Ultimate’s forced to do bad things because of Junko. He failed to help his friends when the insane blond made them dance on her strings, but this time…

“I hear what you’re saying, Kirigiri.” Makoto smiled apologetically. “But I can’t leave them. Back then, we did as Enoshima pleased, and by the time we all embraced hope, only a third of us remained. It’s different now; all of them are alive and asking for help. I know it could be a trap, but if the small possibility of restoring them to normal and reuniting them with Nanami exists, I want to do it. I’m not going to ask you to be with me on this. Just give me some transportation, point me in the right direction, and tell the Future Foundation I went rogue.”

Kyoko grimaced. She knew him well enough so figure, despite it all, he wanted to help them. “But…this isn’t your fight. Even if their pleas are genuine, the Future Foundation will come down on you hard. There’s no good ending for you here…”

Makoto smiled, clenching his fist. “I remember you all said that in the final trial when Enoshima made her last attempt to engulf us in despair. Back then, we made a hopeful conclusion. And now, I believe we can do the same!”

Kyoko widened her eyes, an extended silence ensuing. Then, the detective closed her eyes, a smile overtaking her face. “Yes, at that time, you did show me the way. You took a completely hopeless situation and turned it on its head—as expected of the Ultimate Hope.” Makoto flushed red with embarrassment before she said, “I’m with you. I know where the island is, but I don’t have any means of transportation.”

“But I know someone who will.” Makoto dug his phone out, calling the one man who knew could help. Once the voice of Byakuya asked if something went wrong, Makoto explained the whole situation. He didn’t minx words. He simply examined the situation and asked for his help. During the explanation, Byakuya didn’t speak up once. When Makoto concluded, he waited for a response.

A few seconds passed before Byakuya said, “…Honestly, you are the biggest bleeding-heart there is.” Makoto heard a sigh and then what sounded like a chuckle. “I guess I’ll be the one driving the boat.”

Makoto grinned, giving the thumbs up to Kyoko to signal the Ultimate Affluent Progeny agreed to assist. “Thanks, Togami.”

“We’re in some luck since alert is low because of the division leaders gathering for that party. Still,
we have a limited window to do this until someone catches on."

“Got it. Also, we’ll need you to come in a truck since there’s fifteen of them. And don’t worry, I’m taking all the eat for this.”

“Guess we’ll just fabricate the story we’re apprehending them and go our own way from there. Hope you’re prepared for the massive shitstorm coming your way, Naegi. If you thought the Future Foundation didn’t treat you friendly before, it’ll seem like a kindergarten bullying compared to the vitriol you’ll get when they find out.”

“Worry about that later. Let’s focus on getting this done.” After ending the call, Makoto and Kyoko exchanged looks before walking back into the lobby. The Remnants of Despair were like statues; they hadn’t moved a single inch after they left. If they did, they did a great job of hiding it. “I agree to help you all, but only on the condition you cooperate fully. If you try anything, the deal is off.”


Is this really what they’re like? thought Makoto. He knew how eccentric Ultimates could be. So, when he imagined Ultimates corrupted by despair, he imagined a rowdy group overrun with degeneracy and raucousness. But this group in front of him looked composed, a stable unit of individuals. “… Well, you need to come with us.”

“If I may,” said a blonde woman. Makoto marveled at her beauty for a moment, her pale skin giving her a majestic glow, “there is another individual upstairs in the classroom 77-B.”

Another one? “Alright, I’ll go get him. Listen to everything Kirigiri tells you.” Makoto walked to the classroom, recalling the layout of the school. He continued to keep his eyes out for any traps or tricks waiting in the shadows. Things were quiet when he reached the designated floor. He walked down the hallways until the classroom doors laid in front of him.

“This is it…” He opened the doors, and a huge change in scenery hit his eyes. The evening sun shined through the massive opening on the entire east side of the classroom, illuminating the class in radiant orange. The damage probably occurred during the chaos around the academy at that time. An odd feature about the classroom laid on a desk in the back: a vase with a flower planted in it. It looked out of place; something like that usually was at shrines or graves.
However, he didn’t wonder about it because his attention gravitated towards the figure standing at the edge of the big opening, his long hair swinging in the breeze. *Who is this…?* he thought. He didn’t have a clue what to make of this indvivial. It didn’t seem right to call him a Despair…but, and Makoto couldn’t say why, this man wasn’t normal. The sight memorized, yet intimidated him at the same time.

Makoto gulped when the figure turned his head, their eyes meeting. His eyes seemed cold and empty, even more so than the Despairs he just met. Just how did this person come to be? Better yet, what’s he doing here? After finding the words he wanted, Makoto said, “… W-were you a student in this class too?”

His drifted towards the flower on the desk, causing Makoto to raise an eyebrow. “I have no connection to this class.”

“How did he know I agreed to it…? The man in the suit disappeared, his movement robotic. Makoto encountered bizarre people during his tenure with the Future Foundation, but he doubted his meeting with that guy would ever fade from memory.

However, he shook his head, refocusing on the massive task ahead, his mind made up. This would kick up a frenzy unlike what the Future Foundation’s seen since the mutual killing game. He expected them to jail him for this stunt. But he accepted that and held his chin up high. *No turning back now.*

VVV
Kyosuke smiled, his hands in his pockets as the cherry blossoms fell from the trees like crystal rain, many of Hope’s Peak’s students socializing and celebrating their graduation. Today he graduated with his dear friends, Chisa and Juzo, and big things were ahead. It felt like the few times he had the chance to stop and admire the hard work he put in. Years of his parents demanding excellence in every facet imaginable shaped him into the Ultimate Student Council president, leading to him graduating the revered Hope’s Peak Academy.

While he pondered his plans to expand the school overseas, he felt Chisa hook his arm with hers, her bright smile triggering a sensation of joy like it always did. “Someone’s deep in thought,” said Chisa. “You don’t always have to be thinking ahead, you know? Just enjoy this moment, Kyosuke.”

Kyosuke chuckled. “It’s never a bad time to think of the future, Yukizome. We can’t get complacent with success. Always staying one step ahead assures an increased level of prosperity.”

Chisa pouted. “You know I can’t counter when you talk in that fancy corporate lingo. Talk some sense into him, Sakakura.”

“I’m not in this.” Juzo started throwing air punches. “All I know is I can’t wait to get back in the ring. I belong in big venues, not some school. Can’t wait to teach those young bastards a lesson who said I’ve gotten soft since enrolling here. I’ll show them who the real fuckin’ champ is!”

The housekeeper put her hands on her hips, rolling her eyes. “Geez, it’s our last day together for who knows how long and all you guys can think about is work.” Chisa turned to the academy, her expression dimming. “… I’m going to miss it, all the times we walked from our dorms together to class, all our fun adventures. Heck, even our bad times were nice since they offered great learning experiences. I’m…going to miss you two so much…”

Kyosuke exchanged a troubled glance with Juzo. Both already thought about their plans after today, and the entire time, Chisa’s been feeling bad about separating. The housekeeper often concealed her emotions behind her bright smile since she hated making him and Juzo worry. Clearly, she’d been hiding her sorrow the whole day.

Rubbing his head, Juzo said, “It’s not like we’ll never see each other again, Yukizome. We have each other’s e-mail addresses, plus you and Munakata can hit me up anytime. When I’m not training, we can get together somewhere.”

Kyosuke nodded. “You’ll be pursuing a teaching certificate to teach at Hope’s Peak while I’ll help with expanding the school. The elementary school program we started was successful enough for
other countries to invest in a branch of Hope’s Peak Academy for themselves. We already have tons of backers from all over Europe and America. Perhaps I could call you one day to work overseas as a teacher and ambassador for the school.”

Chisa smiled from ear to ear, a face that could light up a room. “It’s just a lot to take in. Both of you will be in and out of Japan, and I might be too if being a teacher works out for me. We’ve worked so hard for years, and now I just want to relax with my two best friends.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Juzo. “Let’s go chill over some food then. I could go for some barbeque. Been a while since we’ve had that.”

“Sounds good.” Chisa eyed Kyosuke. “That good with you, Mr. Workaholic?”

Truthfully, Kyosuke wanted to work right away. He never liked his fingers and mind going unused for too long, lest his skills grow dull. But when Chisa gave him that pleading look, turning her down was near impossible even for him. “Sure, it’ll be on me.”

He agreed, even offering to pay for the food, but Chisa still narrowed her eyes. “You’re always concerned about being number one,” Chisa said. “Even now, you still can’t turn off that drive you have to excel at everything.”

What does she mean by that? thought Kyosuke. Kyosuke didn’t see the problem with wanting to strive towards success. “I’ve always been this way since day one. The victors write history. I want to be the one that writes it, as well as the one who spearheads us to the future.”

Chisa sighed. “Guess there’s really no helping it.” Chisa pumped her fist. “Okay, from now on, I’ll make sure to help you be number one! I’ll just settle for number two.”

“Hey!” yelled Juzo, annoyed. “You forgetting about me?”

Chisa put up a finger. “I won’t lose to you, Sakakura!”

“What the hell are you even talking about!”
Kyosuke grinned as Juzo and Chisa butted heads for the hundredth time, always over some mundane reason he didn’t understand. His high society peers often asked the same questions about his relationship with them. Why do you spend your time around lower civilians? Why converse with them when their talents are many leagues below yours in acumen?

And he always answered the same: because he enjoys spending time with them. Ever since the day they first met, Kyosuke enjoyed their company after a hard day. He didn’t know why he spent time with them since he never kept company like the duo before. He only knew they were friends.

“Oh look!” yelled Chisa, breaking away from her argument with Juzo, pointing at a photographer. “Let’s take another picture!”

Neither Kyosuke nor Juzo had time to object before Chisa grabbed both of their arms and pulled the three together. Chisa put up two peace signs and screamed, “Friend forever!” Juzo cracked his face into a grin while Kyosuke made a modest smile as the camera flashed.

VVV

Kyosuke snapped out of his daydream, unintendedly allowing his mind to wander more than he meant. Finally, he walked upright again, his legs healthy enough to walk after recovering from Chiaki hitting his spine with VEIL. Once the doctors said he could leave the hospital, Chisa pulled him out of bed, laid out his favorite white suit, and the duo left by helicopter to the main base of the Future Foundation to attend Chiaki’s party.

To his knowledge, Chiaki failed in her quest to bring them together and only a few people awaited him in the conference room. He expected the result. Getting the division leaders to come together for something as little as a party for their vice chairman? No way even the “savior” could pull that miracle.

The long-time friends walked through the halls of the main base after the helicopter arrived. Kyosuke missed the hectic sounds of his subordinates working, the sounds of telephones and computer monitors, and the refined atmosphere of professionalism he worked so hard for the Future Foundation to attain. It might’ve taken Chiaki zapping his spine, but for the first time in a while—he grinned at the beautiful organization he built.

Never one to miss a beat, Chisa giggled, her arms playfully behind her back. “I’m glad you’re happy to be back, Kyosuke. You not working is like a flower forced to live underground.”
“Heh, it seems hospitalization made me a bit homesick. Since I’m always looking ahead, I realized…I never stopped to admire the results the organization has achieved.”

“I just figured that’s how people with your mentality think. Kind of like how billionaires who’ll never need to work anymore because of their massive success, but the high of constantly attaining that success is more fulfilling than indulging in their endless wealth.”

Kyosuke grinned, impressed how perceive the housekeeper proved to be. “But truly…what a marvelous thing we’ve managed to build for the world and the future.”

“You mean what you built. Your drive to correct the wrong we allowed to happen is the reason this all exists—you the true leader of the Future Foundation. Make no mistake, Kyosuke, the Future Foundation is your legacy.”

He always considered the Future Foundation a tool to achieve his goals—stopping the mastermind of the Tragedy, and becoming the hope people wanted to follow like a divine king. But after Makoto took his place, doing what he couldn’t do, that plan failed. Then why did he still hold the organization so dear if it didn’t complete its purpose? If the tool failed to do what he wanted, then why hadn’t he cast it aside as a failure like he’d done so many other projects?

The answer came to him. He realized the same reasoning applied to when people questioned his friendship with Chisa and Juzo—it wasn’t just a tool to him. This organization became much more than that—a pact with his friend to help those in need, and while they didn’t always agree, his subordinates depended on him.

And just like they depended on them, he depends on them as well.

“My,” said Chisa, “you seem even happier now.”

“I just realize those annoying platitudes Naegi spouting off about may not be complete nonsense.”

Chisa seemed amused before stepping in front of him; they reached the conference room doors. The housekeeper’s back faced him as she said, “Yes, we must preserve the Future Foundation at all costs. If this organization failed, well…what intense despair that would cause for you…” Chisa turned her head and smiled at him. “And we don’t want that. Now, be nice and act like your surprised.”
“Is there a point? Nanami only managed to get a few of them to come, right?”

“Hmm, depends on our definition of ‘a few’.”

Chisa shoved the doors open, revealing a scene that made Kyosuke’s jaw opening in surprise, a rare occurrence. The brightly lit room contained all the Future Foundation division leaders save for Kyoko, and the smiling face of Chiaki Nanami stood at the forefront, a cake in hand with the banner that said, “Welcome Back!” hung overhead.

Chisa winked. “Told you not to underestimate the savior, hehe.”

Before Kyosuke got a word in, all the division leaders in unison—some with more enthusiasm than others—shouted, “Welcome back, Vice Chairman!”

Kyosuke shook his head, trying his best to conceal a grin. It still escaped anyway. “What a bunch you all are.”

VVV

Chiaki soaked in the fruits of her very tiring efforts to get everyone together. It took asking, begging, and some favors—most of them coming courtesy of a certain confectioner—but her quest came to a successful end...or it would have if Kyoko would’ve come. The detective put a black mark on her quest, but Chiaki ruled that her friend had other tasks, especially since her sanctions lifted not long ago.

Besides the division leaders, she decorated the room with the usual party arrangements, but the special treat laid on the huge screen on the wall. Miaya, the awesome person she was, agreed to Chiaki’s request to have retro game sprites made of the division leaders. Kyosuke seemed indifferent, but Chiaki loved it. The gamer wanted everyone to play games together, but Miaya said not to “push her luck,” and that the sprites were enough.

Instead of playing games, they did what boring adults do and mingled with each other. Everyone stood in their own area conversing about whatever they had on their mind. Chiaki listened to Daisuke go on about life on the farm, his many siblings, and his hardworking parents. The gamer knew nothing about agriculture, but the pure emotion Daisuke emoted while talking kept her attention.
Ruruka and Seiko awkwardly discussed a new treat the confectioner developed. Apparently, she made for people who couldn’t eat sugar like Seiko. The two had a rare moment of comradery before Ruruka demanded the pharmacists try it, and Seiko turned her down. At least she’s trying, thought Chiaki, willing to give Ruruka that much credit. The rest of the party didn’t have much excitement, only meager conversations and Chisa cutting the cake so perfectly symmetrical, an android couldn’t have done it better.

Chiaki sat by herself at the end of the table until a welcomed face she hadn’t talked to yet walked, or rather rolled, to her. “Miaya,” said Chiaki, a grin escaping like it always did around the therapist.

Miaya took a deep breath before Usami said, “Okay, I’m ready.” The therapist moved aside her monitor and held out her arms, a common position for a hug.

The action confused Chiaki considering Miaya’s shyness about contact, but her eyes seemed determined so Chiaki went in for the hug. A gasp escaped her mouth when Miaya put a single arm around her. Then Chiaki backed away because of how red the therapist got. “Wow,” said Chiaki, “you’ve gotten better.”

“I’ve been practicing really hard!” said Usami, after Miaya put her monitor back into place. “Though, I still have much progress to make. Anyway, I’m so proud of you! Putting all this together for the vice chairman was kind.”

“It’s the least I could do after almost crippling him. I’m lucky I wasn’t fired or thrown in jail.”

“Nonetheless, this was a good thing not only for the vice chairman but everyone else as well.” Miaya gestured to the others, all of them smiling and friendly. “When Chisa boasted about your ability to bring people together, I thought she exaggerated. Now I’m beginning to think her praise wasn’t high enough. This is something I doubt even I could’ve done in a year, let alone a week.”

Chiaki waved her hands. “Really, I don’t have any hidden ability like that, I think. Things just happened to work out.”

“Well, somehow, ever since waking up from that coma, you’ve done nothing but make things work out. Perhaps the savior is hiding her true form.”

“Oh, not you too, Miaya.”
“Hey, Gekkogahara!” greeted Chisa. “Mind if I get some quality time with my sweetie here for a little bit?”

“No problem! Talk to you later, Chiaki!”

Miaya rolled off in her high-tech wheelchair, while Chiaki stared into the eerily gentle eyes of her former teacher. The gamer hadn’t gotten the chance to talk about her encounter with Izuru with her yet. Chisa probably wouldn’t give her a straight answer, but Chiaki asked, “Why did you want me to see Izuru again?”

“I didn’t, or it’s better to say I didn’t care. He’s the one who wanted to test you; I just helped set it up. The results weren’t too favorable for us I heard.”

“Yeah… He said if I faced Junko, I’d lose.” Chiaki couldn’t piece it together, the myriad of things Izuru mentioned: Hajime returning, all her friends gathering, a confrontation against Junko—it befuddled her. But, in what’s become the norm for her, the circus of insanity would likely come to her. “I don’t know what it all means…”

“You’ll find out, probably.” Chisa gazed at their conversing subordinates. “The more things change, the more they stay the same. Once again, you’ve managed to make different-minded people gather together.”

“They’re here to celebrate the vice chairman, not me.”

“Wrong, they’re here because you asked them to be here, they’re here because you’ve proven you’re more than just a gamer… they’re here because—like our class—you’re the link that’s brought them together today.”

Chiaki gasped. “Ms. Yukizome…you…” A tear fell down the housekeeper’s eyes as she continued to smile. Unlike the fake tears she became accustomed to, this seemed genuine. “Why are you crying?”

“Hmm?” Confusion draped her face before she wiped her cheek and gazed at her tears. “Huh, I didn’t realize…”

“Did something make you sad?”
“… I know what it is. Though I didn’t think I’d cry when the time came.” Chisa put her hands on Chiaki’s shoulders and stared into her eyes. Like the tears, it didn’t seem like a facade—her eyes reminded her of the old Chisa. “It's because…our time is coming to an end, Chiaki.”

The gamer stared back at her, not knowing what that meant. “W-what…?”

Then the alarms blared causing Chiaki to jump. Judging by the sound, that alarmed signaled the highest level of urgency

Not long after, a male voice came out from the intercoms overhead. “Chairman, Vice Chairman, there’s been a shocking new development!”

“Report it now!” yelled Kyosuke.

“Not long ago, we received an anonymous broadcast and transcription from an undisclosed location! That location turned out to be Jabberwock island. We don’t know how they did it, but the broadcast is being forcibly streamed to Future Foundation terminals all over the world!”

Everyone in the room gasped. Chiaki’s heart began beating like a thousand drums. That same feeling a year ago when an agent alerted her the mutual killing game broadcast seeped throw her.

“Oh dear!” yelled Usami as Miaya furiously taped on her laptop. “I left operations in the hands of my second in command so I don’t have a clue what’s happening!”

“Gekkogahara,” yelled Kazuo, “reroute the broadcast the monitor in this room.”

“Already on it!” Seconds later, the sprites of the division leaders moving around a pixelated screen vanished, replaced with a new image.

Chiaki would never forget the feeling that ran through her those seconds.

On the screen laid an image so stunning, everyone in the room turned to her. Never had she
received such glances of pure shock. Chiaki understood though since reality left her for a few moments. *This is a dream*, she repeated in her mind over and over, hoping she’d awake in bed at any moment. But it wasn’t a dream, and the image on the monitor was real.

Yes, the image of herself on the screen with her friends on a beach played out on the screen.

And then the voice she dreaded played.

“Welcome to the show, Future Foundation!” yelled the voice of Monokuma. “You all thought this couldn’t happen again, didn’t you? You all thought despair had finally lost, didn’t you? Well, too bad! It’s time for an encore, and I’m sure this sequel will be much better than the last one! For these contestants are none other than the former seventy-seventh class, or the Remnants of Despair! And who can forget their dear class representative, someone I’m sure the Future Foundation knows well… Chiaki Nanami! Ahahahahaha, how exciting!”

That voice of Monokuma was real, the stares her fellow division leaders were real…and yet, Chiaki stood still, looking at a clone of herself and her classmates, frozen in time. Izuru and Chisa’s words echoed in her head.

She knew…the game just started.
Where should one’s attention be in the madness ensuing?

Despite the stares she received, Chiaki’s eyes stayed glued to the screen, a younger version of herself conversing with her class. As if she watched her own memories, the scene looked like one from her past. Even though she knew she was herself, the realness of it made her question her identity for a moment. She didn’t have a clue why another version of herself existed.

Then there were the glares coming her direction. In their minds, they must be thinking of her as the traitor most of them assumed. Putting herself in their shoes, she’d think the same thing. The game tore her eyes from the screen, glancing at Yukizome with her head down, turning away from everyone.

The cat finally came out of the bag; the whole Future Foundation knows their secret. Now even her cunning former teacher couldn’t squeeze them out of this one.

Before anyone in the room spoke, the guy over the intercom said, “And also, the person who sent the transcript was…Makoto Naegi, sir. It appears he has something to do with the Remnants of Despair injecting themselves in the Neo World Program.”

Naegi…don’t tell me… Chiaki didn’t want to believe it, but she thought of Kyoko not accepting her invitation and it all came together in her mind. If he thought it’d help, would Makoto willingly take her former classmates to the Neo World Program? Chiaki knew the answer, as she knew everyone in this room did as well.

“Not again…” murmured Ryouta, bending down with his hands over his head. “H-how could this be happening again…?”

“This can’t be real!” yelled Usami as Miaya furiously typed away on her laptop. “I keep trying to get into the system but there’s a bug that’s completely locked me out! No matter what I do, it just changes its code and boots me out again! I’ve completely lost admin privileges! It’s almost like it’s alive and actively adapting… What human could make something like this…!”

Chiaki knew the answer to that as well. Who else could make a virus so lethal that even Miaya couldn’t do anything about it? And the realization of it hurt. Kamakura, are you on her side after all…?
Koichi stared at the ground, a serious expression. “Well, that might explain why Kirigiri hasn’t joined us. Don’t tell me you’re behind this as well…”

*Kyoko…thought Chiaki, why didn’t you— Chiaki train of thought shattered when she felt someone grab her collar before shoving her body the wall so hard, she gasped.*

She winced before opening her eyes, the rage-filled face of Juzo pinning her to the wall by her coat. “I fucking knew it!” he yelled, Chiaki feeling spit hit her face. “You were the traitor all along!”

“Don’t be so rough with her, Sakakura!” yelled Seiko from behind her mask. “We don’t know that yet!”

“Use your fucking brain, Kimura! She’s been getting in our good graces all this time, then she tried to cripple Munakata, and now she used this conveniently time party to distract us while her partners in crime from the seventy-eighth class execute their master plan with the remnants!”

“T-that’s not…”

Ryouta walked over and put a hand on Juzo’s. “Please, we can’t assume such things. Let’s just…”

Juzo hit him in the gut before shoving the animator back with his boot. “Screw off! As far as I’m concerned, this bitch is guilty!”

“Gekkogahara,” said Kazuo, as stoic as ever. “Why is it we’re seeing Nanami on the screen if she’s right here?”

Miaya’s eyes went from side to side. Clearly, she didn’t want to answer that question. “Well… that’s because…you see—”

Mostly everyone jumped when a fist hit the table, that fist belonging to Kyosuke. His face wasn’t as angry as Juzo’s, but the pure vehemence in his demeanor scared her even more than the boxer. No doubt he’s the most pissed off person in the room. “Answer the question, Gekkogahara.”
She still seemed reluctant, but Usami said, “… I designed the Neo World Program with an AI designed to take the form of whomever the combined unconscious of everyone in the Neo World Program yearned for…”

“How about that?” said Juzo. “A bunch of Despairs wants to see you? If that ain’t the nail in the coffin, I don’t know what is.”

“But please understand,” said Usami, “that it could mean a lot of things! It could be the aggregate desire of a single memory from a time they weren’t Despairs, or it could be the only memory they all shared! This doesn’t make her guilty of any wrongdoings in the—”

“Shut up!” yelled Juzo. “All I keep hearing are sorry excuses, but the facts are speaking for themselves!” Juzo tightened his grip on Chiaki enough for her to have trouble breathing. “Let’s just arrest her and blow up that damn island—”

Another hand landed on Juzo’s arm, a much bulkier and stern one. Then the giant hand of Gozu shoved Juzo back as Chiaki fell to the ground, rubbing the area around her neck, feeling instant relief. Juzo got to his feet, an angry glance at Gozu. “The hell are you playing at, Gozu?”

“I’m in as much disarray as you at the thought of a trusted comrade being a traitor, Sakakura. However, the cooler heads prevail in a dire situation such as this. We can’t forget that Nanami hasn’t gotten the chance to tell her side of the story at all.”

Then, some laughter erupted from the far side of the room. Ruruka grabbed her sides as she laughed before rubbing her eyes. “I’d just like to say…I was right all along! I said from day one we shouldn’t trust her, and now I’m vindicated. But that’s not all… Are we all forgetting the other guilty party in this room, the woman who could not only set this up but taught that class and has a history of mishandling her students…?” Ruruka pointed at Chisa. “I wanna hear your story too, Chisa Yukizome!”

All eyes turned to Chisa who, like she’s been ever since the killing game began playing, standing still, silent with her auburn hair hiding her eyes.

“Yukizome,” said Kazuo, “Nanami, start explaining if you will.”

“I…” murmured Chiaki. *Do I just tell the truth?*
Ryouta stood, holding his gut. “Please tell them you two; tell them you’re innocent!”

“I…” *But I was lying the whole time, so wouldn’t I just be confirming what they’re saying…?*

“Why are you putting Yukizome into this!” yelled Juzo. “The only guilty one is Nanami and those bastards from the seventy-eight class!”

Tears began to form in the gamer’s eyes because of all the stress of this predicament. “I…” *Then do I tell them the truth about Ms. Yukizome? Would they believe me? Would it even matter?*

“Look at them,” said Ruruka. “They can’t say a thing. Silence speaks volumes in this situation! They’re probably thinking of a cover story as we speak!”

*Why…?* Chiaki looked over to Chisa. She didn’t speak, move, or react to anything—she just stood there. So many times, Chisa manipulated the situation to save them if things started going south. But now, the housekeeper did nothing. It could’ve been she had no more moves to play, but it didn’t explain her reluctance to even try.

All the planning and moves she made to make her the savior, and now the final game against hope and despair arrived. Even so, Chisa didn’t use her words to get them out of this. *Why won’t you speak…? You want me to play this stupid game…so, just get us out of it like you always do…!*

“Yukizome,” said Kyosuke, glancing over to his best friend, his eyes unblinking, “speak, now!”

The housekeeper’s lip quivered before she hugged her shoulders. Relief set in for the gamer. Chisa would make an emotional plea to everyone, convincing them they weren’t guilty. Then they’d overcome this and stop Junko like Chisa always said she could. Yes, surely that’s what was about to happen.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, Chisa lunged at Kyosuke before and embracing him. “I can’t believe she would betray my trust like this! All this time, she used me and lied so she could get her own way! I always thought something was odd about the things she told me, but I didn’t want to say because I trusted her! She was nothing but a Despair!”
What are you…! Her world turned upside down. Now everyone’s attention firmly locked on her, some looking shocked while others seemed enraged. There wasn’t any hook or a wink or a nod. Chisa lied and sold her out. “S-she’s lying…”

At that moment, Chiaki forgot about their past, forgot about her fear, and forgot about the collar around her neck.

“She’s been lying this whole time!” yelled Chiaki. “She made me lie so you wouldn’t find out the truth about her! Junko brainwashed her into a Despair and she’s been acting in her own interest this entire time! Everything happening right now was planned by her, and she threatened my life to make me go along with it!”

Chisa dug her face into Kyosuke’s white suit. “I can’t believe you could do something like this! Why…why did all my students betray me! I should’ve just listened to you all along, Kyosuke!”

“No, I…” Chiaki words became incoherent and faint. She had the truth on her side, but the gamer didn’t know how to flip this situation. “All…I wanted to do was save my friends…”

“Arrest her!” yelled Kyosuke.

Many things happened at once, too many things for Chiaki to mentally keep track of, one being an action she took. She didn’t consciously think of doing it, but her fingers moved to VEIL the instant Kyosuke gave that order and fired a sonic blast. The room was small enough for the blast to echo, rupturing Chiaki’s hearing as it did everyone else in the room since they grabbed their ears.

The gamer shook off her disorientation and ran out of the room at full speed. Yelling came from behind her, likely someone giving orders to chase after her. She ran to the stairs, before marching down them, her mind unable to stay on one subject because of all that happened in just the last ten minutes.

And as she ran, a question popped in her head: How would she get out of here?

The only way to and from the main base was by air or water. Chiaki, a fugitive as of now, didn’t have a way out. And even if she did, what could she do? The only thing that came to her is interjecting herself in the game currently playing out on Jabberwock; her desire to save her friends remained. But how would she get there? And then Izuru’s foreboding words rang in her head.
Also, she noticed something strange as she arrived on the ground floor lobby. None of the Future Foundation agents stopped her—sending her odd looks is most they did—and there weren’t any alarms or announcements of her treason. Why haven’t they alerted everyone yet? Maybe Ms. Yukizome decided to help me after all…?

She stopped in her tracks in the middle of the lobby because of the development in front of her. Somehow—she didn’t know how it could happen—from a hole in the roof, the massive form of Gozu hit the ground, effectively blocking her path to the exit. His red eyes made her gulp as he huffed loudly. “I cannot allow you to proceed, Nanami.”

“Gozu…” A giant wall of muscle and might barricaded her path, and fighting wasn’t an option, the difference between their strength vast. “This is all a setup… The true traitor to the Future Foundation is Ms. Yukizome!”

“I don’t know what and what isn’t the truth, Nanami. I’m inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt because I’ve seen your heart firsthand during the rehabilitation. However, you must realize things don’t look good for you right now, and now with the advent of another killing game, it’s the utmost importance you cooperate fully.”

Cooperate and then what? A lifetime in a dark jail cell most likely, and that’s if the vice chairman didn’t chop her head off. Chisa had the Future Foundation wrapped around her finger in ways the gamer could never hope to. The housekeeper has all sorts of evidence incriminating Chiaki hidden way while she had nothing on her. Chisa already had this battle of “truth” won the day Chiaki woke up from her coma.

“Sorry, Gozu…but I let myself get caught, it’ll be the end and my friends will never be saved.” Tightened her resolve, she moved her fingers to VEIL’s touchscreen again, figuring she’d go for broke since surrendering meant defeat anyway.

But before she could, a knife flew past her arm and stuck in the ground. She recognized who it belonged to. “Let me give you more advice,” said Sonosuke, approaching her side, knives in hand, “don’t make any sudden moves.”

“It’s over, you damn traitor,” said Juzo, arriving on her other side. “Boy, you had me played for a fool. All that at the Despara Carnival was bullshit. You set up that ambush and let Kitta Takara take the fall to make yourself appear innocent.” Juzo tightened his gaze. “And damn it, I actually let myself believe it…!”

Out of all the insanity that’s happened in the foundation, this held the less hope of her getting out
of it. In front of her laid the Ultimate Wrestler, on her left side laid the Ultimate Blacksmith, and on her right laid the Ultimate Boxer—the men that by themselves far outclassed her in combat. Also, the grunts around them caught on to what’s happening, their hands on their weapons should they need to.

This is the part where Chisa has extra measure taken to even the odds somewhat, like a stage director conducting the scenes from the background. But she knew Chisa abandoned her. No one was coming to help.

So, there was no escape.

Chiaki scanned the ground, feeling regret. A big reason she followed Chisa, aside from the fear and blackmail, was because she always worked towards her plan, defeating Junko. But now, Chiaki’s first assertion seemed correct. The whole savior thing was a big wind-up to the punchline full of despair, Chiaki getting arrested while knowing her friends are at Junko’s mercy once again.

The gamer had to admit, it worked to perfection.

But even as she despaired, Chiaki held on to one thread of hope, ironically from the person who said she had no chance. Back then, Kamakura said I’d lose…but that I’m also the one who defies his predictions. What did she have to lose? This question calmed her. If even a being made of talent can’t fully grasp her, maybe this situation isn’t impossible. I must try...for my friends!

Just as she went for VEIL again, she stopped when something pressed against her neck. She looked in fear at her own reflection in Kyosuke’s blade. The way he had it on her neck, if he wanted…it’d be over in a second. She could feel the malice from behind her, just waiting for the excuse to end her. The gamer didn’t even want to breathe.

“By all means,” he said in a flat voice, making it even more threatening, “do it.”

Chiaki resigned herself, letting her arms slouch down to her sides, not so foolish enough as to think there was a chance at this point. “Please…Ms. Yukizome made me lie to you all. If you don’t do something about her now—” Th gamer gasped when the vice chairman bunted his katana’s hilt into her gut, causing her to fall to her knees.

“Empty words,” said Kyosuke, walking in front, looming over the gamer like an executioner about to bring down the ax. “Why should I believe a word you say at this point? Suddenly, everything
about your circumstances fit. You knew who the Remnants were, you knew Mukuro Ikusaba would return, you knew about the plot to corrupt the Neo World Program, and you knew today would be the day the next killing game you begin. You trying to cripple me when you did makes sense now.”

She had to wrestle the words out since her throat became dry, the fear of Kyosuke bringing down that sword all she could think about. “I knew who the Remnants were, but only because Ms. Yukizome told me. I didn’t have a clue about Mukuro. I knew another game would start, but only because Ms. Yukizome helped set it up. And me attacking you…was honestly an accident, and I wanted a party to make up for it…”

“There you go again…” Kyosuke’s glare sharpened even more. “How dare you accuse Yukizome of anything? She’s been a faithful friend of mine for years, helped build this organization, and is the reason you’re alive and I didn’t order the doctors to pull the plug. And you insist on selling this notion she’s a Despair… Have you no respect for the woman who gave you everything!”

This is exactly what Chiaki thought would happen, and what Chisa said would happen. Clearly, setting aside any kind of professional relationship, Chisa meant a lot to Kyosuke. Even when witnessing Chisa’s new depravity, there are times Chiaki wanted to close her eyes and pretend the same woman who inspired her back then stood in front of her. But that reality didn’t exist anymore.

“I know how you feel…Ms. Yukizome meant so much to me back then. I loved her so much, I always wanted her to be there overlooking all the progress I made in life. But…because I was too weak…she had to suffer. Setting up this game is possible for her because she controls all the information, has tons of privileges, and…you have a soft spot for her so she can make you overlook—”

Kyosuke stabbed his sharp blade in the floor, causing Chiaki to stop, ice water flowing through her veins. She figured it was worth a shot, but unless she had absolute evidence, the gamer couldn’t convince Kyosuke the actual housekeeper he held dear died back then. Heck, she doubted video evidence would be enough. It took a negotiating talent far beyond her.

“I’ve heard enough of what you have to say,” he said, raising his blade.

“Munakata!” yelled the voice of Usami. “Are you really going to do this right here in front of everyone! This is going too far!”

“Quiet, Gekkogahara,” he said. “This should’ve been done a long time ago.”
“I believe I’m in agreement with her, Munakata!” said Gozu. “This is unbecoming of an organization representing hope! As a killing game is going on, do you really want to execute one of own? What difference is there between us and the Despair’s then…”?

“…The difference is this girl below me is not one of us, nor has she ever been. She’s a Despair, and like I was right about all along…Despairs must be eliminated for the sake of a bright future!”

Chiaki stopped breathing as she could tell by the vice chairman’s body, he brought the sword down towards her. Some people screamed in the background, at least she thought so. She couldn’t hear anything right now. Images of everything she’d been through flashed before her eyes while she wished it wouldn’t hurt. That would make it better than her hellish execution at least.

Sorry, guys…I already got game over…

“Kyosuke!” shrieked the voice of Chisa, both urgent and stern in its announcement. Chiaki let out a gasp when Kyosuke stopped his swing. She didn’t dare check, but the blade probably rested only millimeters above her neck. “Not here…”

What did this mean now? First, she sells her out and now she saved her from decapitation. As usual, Chiaki couldn’t read the housekeeper actions at all. Regardless, after a few seconds of silence, Kyosuke pulled back his blade which felt as if a great weight fell off Chiaki’s body. Her body became so tense, she forgot how to breathe for a moment.

Sonosuke approached her before grabbing her arm and entering the code to release VEIL from her wrist.

“Lock her away,” said Kyosuke before turning away from her.

Chiaki didn’t hesitate at all while two agents pulled her to her feet and handcuffed her. While they dragged her out of the lobby, Chiaki scanned the faces of her former subordinates. She didn’t know why since seeing everyone’s face would make this harder, but she did anyway.

Those like Seiko, Daisuke, and Ryouta looked upset, many looked angry like Ruruka and Juzo, and some didn’t have any discernable reaction like Koichi, Kyosuke, and Chisa who refused to look her way. The only thing magnanimous was the demoralizing feeling having things turn so bad in just the past hour.
One more person awaited her at the end of the lobby, ironically her closet friend in the organization. She didn’t expect the therapist to save her, but she hoped for a look. A look that said she stood by her, a look that said she believed her when no one else did, a look that said she knew all those therapy sessions and everything afterward was genuine and not some kind of trick.

All she needed from Miaya was one reassuring glance to give her a drop of happiness in the sea of despair taking her away.

And of course, Miaya closed her eyes and turned away from her.

From the beginning, Chiaki never wanted to work for the Future Foundation. But she had to admit, she treasured the bonds she made here. Her close friends like Kyoko, Aoi, and Seiko, even types like Ruruka had grown on her. Now, as the division leaders stood behind her, she realized how much they did mean to her. Especially that awkward therapist with the rabbit interface as a mouthpiece.

If Chisa’s goal was Chiaki feeling immense despair, she succeeded. Her empty eyes stared ahead as the killing game continued to play in the background and a clone of herself spoke to Hajime.

She knew then, her time with the Future Foundation…had ended for good.

VVV

Chisa stood by as Kyosuke furiously shuffled papers on his desk. A million things needed doing now, but after Chisa encouraged him to take a breather in his office, the vice chairman listened. He hit his fist against the desk before pinching the bridge of his nose.

“If only I listen to my instinct with Nanami and Naegi instead of entertainment nonsense like I said.”

Chisa closed her eyes. “I have no words… I never thought those two would be capable of such things. Although, in Naegi’s case, I’m sure he fell for some sob story.”

“Until we know what happened, I’m issuing an arrest warrant for Makoto Naegi immediately. I’d
also like to take in Aoi Asahina for questioning, but it seems like she’s in Kirigiri’s division, and they’re not cooperating with her whereabouts. Not to mention Mitarai is another one I’d like to question, but the chairman already said he’d handle it. Damn it…everyone’s just doing as they please…"

“Yes, it’s a lot like the first time the killing game happened. We weathered the storm then, and we will again.” Chisa put a hand on his shoulder; Kyosuke didn’t react any kind of way. “…And what about us? Do you doubt my loyalty? If so, please tell me so we can talk through it.”

Kyosuke didn’t react at first, a moment of silence ensuing before he turned his head to the killing game broadcast. “We can discuss that later. I need to come up with measures to stop this game. Gekkogahara and her division are working overtime to override whatever virus is corrupting the Neo World Program, but if it looks bleak…I might have to use the nuclear option.”

Chisa bit her lip. “Since the broadcast is only at Future Foundation bases, the media hasn’t been made aware yet. Destroying the island doesn’t carry the same implications as destroying Hope’s Peak Academy would’ve. Still, we must explore all our options. And yes, my bias as their teacher does play a factor, but we must not let the mastermind behind this force us into an option we don’t want…”

“…Yukizome, as of now, you’ll be my secretary assisting me with matters until this killing game is settled.”

Chisa narrowed her eyes. “Is this because you want my help…or because you want to keep an eye on me…?”

Kyosuke didn’t answer her question, reaching for a specific file the housekeeper recognized. The file contained information and records for Chiaki, her official file. Chisa knew what came next. “Effectively immediately,” said Kyosuke, reaching for a black marker before marking it, “Chiaki Nanami’s position as the Thirteenth Division leader will be terminated. The division will now be responsible for food distribution and other minor things until this all blows over.”

Chisa expected as much. In every way, today was nothing to celebrate, her savior in jail, and her veil of manipulation she worked hard on slowly being unwoven.

Even so, a smirk escaped as she glanced at the killing game.
“Argh, damn it all!” yelled Ruruka, kicking a chair across her office in anger. For a while now, Sonosuke observed his girlfriend yelling and rambling on about how she was right about everything from the beginning. As usual, he sat stoically and let her release the anger. About an hour passed before the confectioner finally sat down, panting hard, red in the face from so much yelling.

“What a waste of time that was…” murmured Ruruka. “I thought she could be an ally for us when we make our own organization, but no, just another traitor. Why are leaches like that so attracted to me…?”

Sonosuke knew her well, so he was confident in his assertion when he said, “You liked Nanami didn’t you?”

Ruruka stared at her desk for a moment before rising. “Nope, just like Seiko…it was all a waste of time.” She approached Sonosuke before pressing her lips against his, a sensation sweeter than any treat she gave him. Breaking away, she said, “Just be ready, babe. We’ll use this chaos around the killing game and capitalize on it to make ourselves look good when the Future Foundation botches this. Then, the future is all ours.”

“Of course, Ruruka.”

“Don’t ever betray me, Sonosuke…”

“Never.”

The confectioner smiled, tears in her eyes, before she sat on his lap and met his lips with her’s once more.

VVV

The chairman sat in his office with Koichi and Gozu keeping him company. The three older gentlemen chatted about the state of things, and of course, the betrayal of Chiaki. All while the killing game continued to play.
Koichi took a swig of his liquor, something he did often today based on how empty the tin bottle sounded. “Man, if Jin were alive, he’d punch me in the face. To think I let Kirigiri do something so rash, and all this mess with Nanami… Hehe, what kind of organization are we to let this happen again?”

Gozu crossed his beefy arms. “Certainly…it’s not one of our brightest days. I’m still in shock at what’s transpired… What is the next move going to be, Chairman Tengan?”

Kazuo leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. “Munakata is working on that as we speak. Sadly, until we learn more about the nature of this game and those behind it, we can’t take much practical action.” The chairman sighed. “Honestly, it’s enough to turn one into a nihilist….”

“Personally,” said Koichi, “I’m beginning to doubt my skill as a scout. Nanami, and so many of the other in the seventy-seventh class…they all seemed so promising. Heh, why did it all go so damn sideways…?”

“I know it might not be my place to say this,” said Gozu, “but I’m not sure I think Nanami is the fiend everyone thinks she is now, rather, I think—”

“Chairman Tengan?” said Ryouta poking his head into the room. Kazuo summoned him earlier to discuss an important matter. He decided to do it now because of all the pandemonium transpiring.

“Ah, Mitarai,” said Kazuo. “Can you excuse us, gentlemen?” Koichi and Gozu departed, leaving the chairman alone with the animator who looked more down in the dumps than usual. Naturally, he’d be distraught over Chiaki’s arrest. “I kept the vice chairman from bringing you in for questioning about your involvement with the Remnants, and you know why.” He narrowed his eyes. “… Is it complete?”

Ryouta gulped. “…It is…but I really, really don’t want to use it. I know things are bad, but…we must not use it. Bending people hearts like that isn’t right…”

Kazuo adjusted his glasses, expecting that answer. “Yet, you still made it didn’t you?” Ryouta grimaced. “Your friend has been detained for conspiring, and another killing game with your class being the ones playing is happening. This is your grand chance to fix that wrong from those final days of Hope’s Peak Academy.”
The animator put his hands together, trembling a bit. “I know…I know all that, but—”

Kazuo leaned forward in his chair. “This is your chance. Our opportunity will be close, assuming things go well. What say you…will you take the mantle of Ultimate Hope, or allow to fall out of your grasp once more…?”

The animator stared at the floor as the two sat in silence, the anticipation of Ryouta’s answer hanging in the air.

VVV

How many days had past? Chiaki stopped counting after the third.

After the arrest, they escorted her to a detainment facility, put her in a blue prison uniform, and threw her in a cell. Some complications arrived over her choker since they couldn’t remove it. But the walls in the facility apparently blocked outside communication, so they ignored it, claiming it wouldn’t get a signal if it was a communication device anyway.

The Despara Carnival did give her experiences with jail, but this prison wasn’t the same. The walls were metal, and the doors electronically looked, only a small rectangle for a peephole on it. It barely mattered anyway since the gamer had no illusions of a prison break. Since being here, she sat and looked at the wall, pondering everything that’d happened up till now.

At first, she couldn’t stop the sorrow, but after a while, she just became numb. Numb to the fact Chisa betrayed her, numb to the fact all her friends in the Future Foundation probably cursed her name, numb to the fact her classmates were in a killing game. She just couldn’t care anymore. Caring got her in this situation in the first place.

So, she stayed in bed and did her best to feel nothing. But still, even though days and days went by without anything but the guards bringing her a meal, and even if her next visitor could be someone going to execute her…she still couldn’t get rid of the tiny shred of hope left in her—the hope that something could go right for her.

Someone…please…she thought, give me a reason to hope for the future again…

Then, an odd sound came from the door. Chiaki sat up quickly, bewildered. Her meal already came
today, so this was something else. The gamer’s breaths became heavy, standing and backing into
the wall. Did Kyosuke finally come to finish the job? Maybe Chisa didn’t want to detonate her
collar, and instead wanted to finish the job with her own hands?

The door opened, and Chiaki saw nothing, or rather she didn’t notice anything at first. She raised
an eyebrow before walking to a mechanical spider on the floor. She bent down, looking for clues
as to what it could be.

And then she heard her voice.

“Sorry for making you wait so long,” said a soft voice. “Your jailbreak has arrived!”

Chiaki, feeling warmth for the first time in what felt like an eternity, said, “Miaya!”
What’s going on?” asked Chiaki, happy but confused as she held the mechanical spider in her hand emanating Miaya’s soft voice. “Why did you break me out?”

“I’d love to explain everything, but we’re kinda pressed for time. Just trust me when I say I believe you’re innocent and my current priority is getting you out of this prison. Now, I’m going to give you precise instructions on how to escape this place; follow my every word without question please.”

Without hesitation, Chiaki said, “Alright, I trust you, Miaya.” She had two choices: stay and rot in jail in the pit of despair, or get some answers as to what’s going on. She knew despair waited regardless, but she’d face it on her own terms. “Just tell me what to do.”

Chiaki moved through the cell area, some prisoners taking note of her escape and begging her to release them as well. She recognized a few of them from some of her missions. As Miaya commanded, she ignored them and moved into the lit hallways.

She didn’t know if Miaya had connections in this place, today was a slow day, or maybe Miaya did something—but the halls seemed barren. Every turn she took revealed another empty hallway with no one in sight. She didn’t ask questions, chalking it up to some prudent planning ahead of time.

After minutes of taking turn after turn, Miaya led her to a door to a janitor closet. The moment Chiaki opened the door, a hand grabbed her, yanking her in the small room. The sudden action startled her but smiled upon seeing two people she knew dressed in janitor uniforms. “You two!”

“We’re here to rescue the princess!” said Mizuki Momoka, winking her brown eye. As she said the day Chiaki met her in the Future Foundation lobby after Kitta’s arrest, expressing her gratefulness for saving her little brother—the short-haired brunette joined Chiaki’s division. Her shyness at the time was the opposite of the energetic nature she really had.

“This is not my element…” said Yuuji Minoru, a hefty sigh, not making eye contact like always. Considering he’s one the smartest minds when it comes to tech in the Thirteenth Division, his appeared especially surprised Chiaki. He lifted his cap to scratch his sloppy black hair. “I just had to volunteer.”

Mizuki laughed, elbowing Yuuji. “Minoru went on and on about how we had to save you. We
could’ve sent somebody else but he ‘had to come along’ is what he kept saying.”

The hacker looked embarrassed as Miaya said, “I’m glad you’re enjoying your reunion, but we don’t have much time left. Get Chiaki in position and proceed with the plan.”

“And.” Mizuki patted an empty laundry cart next to her. “Your chariot awaits, Ms. Nanami. Don’t move a muscle, don’t make a sound, and…try and ignore the smell.”

Chiaki climbed inside the cart, laying down in the fetal position to minimize the space she took. Then, Mizuki and Yuuji dumbed a bunch of dirty laundry on top of her, covering her form, darkness all she could see. The smell wasn’t pleasant, but Chiaki had practice. She’d go without cleaning her room for weeks when a new game came out, something her mother scolded her for constantly.

“Everything will be okay,” said Mizuki, reassuring her before she heard the door open and the cart started moving.

There wasn’t much to describe this experience. Chiaki sat in darkness, she heard outside voices and sounds, and the cart would stop sometimes before moving again. All she could do was hope nothing went wrong. Things outside got much louder, meaning they probably crossed a lobby or something. She heard Mizuki mingling with someone for a moment, before the cart moved again. Then, silence ensued outside as she kept moving. The lack of talking made her paranoid. Had something gone wrong? Perhaps Miaya miscalculated or someone caught on and alerted the vice chairman?

Suddenly, the gamer felt the cart shake for a moment, making her gasp. After the shaking stop, she felt nothing, hearing a lot of mummers. She gulped, wishing the cart would move again so she could escape this wretched place.

Finally, after a minute or so, the cart moved again. She tried to calm herself down, hoping with everything she had that Yuuji and Mizuki were still the ones pushing the cart. Her anxiety kept making her imagine the clothes above her torn off only to meet the furious face of Kyosuke or Chisa peering down at her helpless form.

Some time passed before she felt the ground get bumpier like they were on a sidewalk. Then, the weight on top of her lessened, meaning someone lifted the clothes off her. Her heart beat furiously, afraid their plan failed. But a sigh of relief escaped when she saw the smiling face of Mizuki and the blank face of Yuuji.
“Mission accomplished!” said Mizuki, with a thumbs up. “Whew, we almost got caught when somebody asked if they could tag along with us to the laundromat. Thankfully, I managed to convince him to wait until we came back.” She pouted. “You could’ve helped me out there, Minoru.”

“I’m good with tech,” he said, extending a hand to Chiaki to help her out of the cart, “not a negotiator.”

Chiaki’s legs shock, numb from being still so long. When she got feeling back in them, she looked around to see a parking lot surrounded by trees. She closed her eyes before taking in the sun’s rays shining down on her. It felt like she’d been in prison for years and began to think she’d never see the sunshine in the blue sky ever again.

“Really is great how the skies have mostly cleared up after Junko Enoshima’s defeat,” said Mizuki, putting a hand on Chiaki’s shoulders. “You’re free now, Ms. Nanami!”

“You’re also an escaped convict,” added Yuuji, walking to a white truck, the kind that delivered packages. He opened the back before gesturing towards Chiaki. “Hope in. We need to move fast before they find out you’ve escaped. We’re taking you to Gekkogahara’s private jet.”

“She has a private jet?” asked Chiaki, never recalling the therapist telling her that.

“Considering how much she does,” said Mizuki, “it shouldn’t be a surprise she’s pretty wealthy. You can ask her all about it when you get there.”

“But,” said Chiaki, touching the choker around her neck, “if I have this on, Ms. Yukizome can track my location or set it to explode.”

Yuuji examined the choker before pulling out a laser pen. Then he pointed the laser at the choker for a moment. “If that is an exploding tracking device, the neurons in my laser just scrambled the connection to Yukizome’s trigger and feed. You’re safe; now we need to leave.”

“Also,” said Mizuki, “there’s a gift for you in the back, Boss!”
After thanking Yuuji for destroying the accursed choker, Chiaki hopped in the back of the truck before Yuuji and Mizuki closed the doors. The only thing in the back was a box, probably the gift Mizuki mentioned. Chiaki opened it to find her black Future Foundation uniform clean and folded. Also, more surprisingly VEIL laid on top of it as well. Once Chiaki picked up the watch, she noticed a white index card on the bottom.

She read the contents in her head. *Sorry if you have mixed feeling on wearing that uniform. I didn’t know your size. I pulled some string and got VEIL since my division helped make it. See you soon! Love, your therapeutic friend.*

Chiaki smiled as she took off her prison uniform and adorned her old attire. She didn’t feel conflicted wearing it, even if Chisa was the one who picked them out. She preferred her hoodie, but this outfit grew on her during her time with the Future Foundation. It became a part of her.

Chiaki sat, hugging her knees as the truck moved and they drove to where Miaya was. About now, they’ve probably discovered the gamer escaped and is launching a manhunt. She can see the angry face of Kyosuke grabbing his katana, coming to look for her and finish the job. Mostly everyone else would take this as proof she was guilty. And Ms. Yukizome…well, who knew what went through her head?

She could only imagine the scrutiny all those who served under her in the Thirteenth Division are going through. The gamer wished Hina could be here to give her a good kick of optimism and tell her everything would be alright. And she still didn’t know what to think about the shocking sight of the killing game. Who knows what terrible things have happened during the time she spent in prison? She never thought this would happen again except for in her nightmares. Yet it was happening, and she didn’t have a clue what to do about it.

*Please be okay, everyone,* she thought, resting her eyes.

After minutes of sitting in the back, Chiaki looked up when she heard Yuuji and Mizuki exit the truck. Then the doors opened, stinging Chiaki’s eyes as the sunlight exploded into view. After Yuuji helped her out, she saw a private jet, it’s engine awake and loud. Apparently, they took her to a landing strip at an airport.

“That private jet belongs to Gekkogahara,” said Yuuji. “Just go inside and she’ll handle the rest.”

“But,” said Chiaki, worried, “what about you two and everybody else in the Thirteenth Division?”
Mizuki waved her hands. “Not to worry. We’ll be able to slip back in before anybody is the wiser, and the worst they’re doing right now is questioning everyone. We’ve got all our bases covered, Boss! Now hurry up before the authorities catch us, and stay safe!”

Chiaki gazed at the two sympathetically before bowing and thanking them. She rushed to the private jet, Miaya’s pilot welcoming her in. She turned to give her two subordinates one last look, both waving before speeding away in the white truck. The gamer entered the private jet, impressed by how nice it looked inside before spotting a familiar face waiting at the table.

“You made it!” yelled Usami, as commanded by Miaya sitting in her wheelchair. “For a moment, I was worried that—”

Before she finished, Chiaki ran at her, hugging her so abruptly she almost knocked Miaya out of her wheelchair. She knew the therapist was shy, but the overflow of emotions made her act without thinking. After she heard some whimpers from Miaya, the gamer pulled away, wiping some tears from her face. “I… I thought you gave up on me…”

Miaya straightened herself, adjusting her scarf that almost fell off after Chiaki tackled her. Flustered, Miaya made Usami say, “Yeah, sorry about that. I needed to keep up appearances so no one would suspect I’d try this.”

Chiaki sat down across from the therapist. “Wait, so you believe everything I said?”

Miaya looked down for a moment. “I had my suspicions ever since you first began your convalescence. The way you reacted to Chisa seemed strange to me. Even after Chisa explained herself during your vote, it still bothered me. But, Chiaki, you need to explain everything to me. No lies, no leaving anything out, and no deception.”

Chiaki nodded. At this point, she was willing to tell anyone who would listen to the true story of her life under Chisa’s iron fist. So, the gamer explained everything from when she first met Junko to the reveal of the killing game in the Neo World Program. She went into as much detail as she could, even saying things she thought didn’t matter much in the scheme of things.

After what felt like an hour—Miaya’s private jet had taken off long ago—Chiaki finally concluded. Getting all that off her chest felt euphoric, like a weight she’d been carrying for over a year finally fell off. And if there was anyone she wanted to tell, Miaya would’ve been the one. “That’s everything, Miaya. I’m sorry I had to lie to you so much, but… I was scared.”
Miaya’s eyes moved around, the therapist probably deep in thought. Understandably, considering the tale of Chiaki’s life since Hope’s Peak Academy was the definition of insanity. Honestly—Chiaki didn’t realize until she spoke it out loud—but it sounded unbelievable, like a script to some niche visual novel. But it was the unfiltered truth of the life of Chiaki Nanami.

“I understand…” murmured Usami, while Miaya rubbed her forehead. “This is worse than I ever could’ve conceived. To think this all happened behind the scenes and I never knew…”

“You don’t doubt anything I said?”

“I wholeheartedly believe everything you told me because it fits, and that’s the scariest part.” Miaya looked exasperated, more than Chiaki had ever seen. “How could this happen…?”

“I know… I wish there’s something I could’ve done to stop all this back when the school was all chaotic. Because I couldn’t…Ms. Yukizome became what she is…”

“No, it wasn’t your fault. If everything you said is correct, there isn’t much you could’ve done. But still…Yukizome is the worst one to turn out a Despair besides the vice chairman because that means the person who controls the flow of information has been acting in their own interest this entire time. Who knows what’s real and what’s fabricated in the Future Foundation’s records and transactions…?”

“Do you think everyone will listen if we explain. I mean, if you’re with me maybe—” Answering her question with a mere glance, Miaya stared at her with a crestfallen expression. Chiaki hung her head.

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy, Chiaki. Sure, maybe some would believe you, but people like Munakata and Sakakura wouldn’t buy it. Plus, things have been bad since your arrest. There’s dysfunction, infighting, most of the division leaders aren’t talking to one another, people are choosing sides… The Future Foundation is anything but unified now.”

“What’s Ms. Yukizome doing?”

“She’s Munakata’s secretary now. She’s under investigation too, but I don’t know if there will be any kind of real action, especially now that I know everything.” Miaya began to type away at her keyboard. “If I’m right, they’ll discover you’ve escaped in about an hour or so. By that time, you’ll already be long gone though.”
Meeting Miaya again distracted her from the fact she had no clue where she’d go. It’s not like she could go back to her apartment. “Where am going now?”

“Somewhere out of the country in a remote place in the mountains. You’ll have to be away from technology for a while I’m afraid, but it’s important you stay completely off the grid. Now that you’re a criminal, both the Future Foundation and Despairs are no friends of yours.”

Chiaki understood her position and why Miaya’s solution was for the best. Still, she wanted to ask a specific question from the beginning but kept from doing it out of fear of what the answer would be. However, she braced herself and asked, “… What’s happened in the killing game so far?”

Miaya’s eyes looked sad, suggesting Chiaki’s fear had merit. “… I don’t think I should tell you, Chiaki.”

“Why?”

“Because nothing good will come out of it.”

Chiaki held her palms together in her lap, swaying back and forth on whether to follow Miaya’s advice. She rarely disagreed with the therapist, but she said, “Please…I need to see it…”

Miaya sighed, seeming heavily conflicted, before typing on her personal laptop and handing it to Chiaki. “If you press play, you’ll see highlights of everything that’s happened so far. But…I implore you not to look because it’ll just make things harder.”

Chiaki stared at the laptop in front of her, paralyzed by indecision. Why should she watch it? All it would do is fill her with even more despair which is what Junko and Chisa want. No, it was best to walk away from the game now and stop this ride of despair like she should’ve back then. As Miaya said, it would just complicate everything.

But, even so, the image of Junko hurting her friends again, mocking her from afar…

Miaya closed her eyes as Chiaki hit the play button and watched the highlights from the killing game so far; it wasn’t like a good time at the movie theater. She helplessly watched the horrific
events unfold with a hand over her mouth, her eyes tearing up again and her stomach becoming queasy.

So many awful things happened before her eyes. Teruteru murdered the Imposter which put the cook up for execution. Peko brutally killed Mahiru which set forth her execution. Mikan became the blackened next after killing both Hiyoko and Ibuki. Nagito seemed to be obstructing at every turn, everybody seemed to distrust each other as their morale faded, Hajime didn’t seem to be coping well, Junko did anything she pleased, and so many other horrible things that slowly built up and got worse and worse. Truly, a nightmare that’s become a reality.

After catching up, Chiaki wasted no time shutting the laptop and burying her face in her hands. Miaya said something, but she couldn’t hear her. The events played in her head like a video on a loop. It’s like the time they spent with them all never happened, scattered in the wind thanks to Junko. All that remained were kids tearing each other apart for Junko’s entertainment and Chiaki’s horror.

After watching it, she now one hundred percent believed that the A.I. was her copy. The way she tried to unify the others and stop the killings only to fail, a perfect emulation of her real futile efforts to stop Junko. Her despair now came full circle, and she had a front row seat to it. If this is what Chisa and Junko wanted her to experience, Chiaki commended them on thoroughly building up to this despair so well.

*All of you…I’m so sorry I couldn’t do anything…*thought Chiaki.

“I told you it’d make things harder…” murmured Usami. “I’m sorry, Chiaki.”

Chiaki wiped her eyes. “… Isn’t there something you can do?”

“I’ve tried as hard as I can, but no luck. Whoever made that virus is a genius beyond what I can fathom. No matter what I or anyone in my division tried, nothing worked. As of now, the Neo World Program is almost completely out of my control, and there’s nothing meaningful I can do to help your classmates.”

“Can’t somebody else in the Future Foundation?”

“Our hands are tied. The vice chairman has cut off all routes to the island, sitting on the options to just destroy the whole thing but he’s reluctant for various reasons. Naegi and his group aren’t
cooperating, insisting working on helping them in their own way. Lots of the Future Foundation’s manpower became diverted thanks to all the coordinated attacks by Despairs around the world. As I told you, many of the upper brass of the Future Foundation aren’t on speaking terms. It’s a giant mess right now…”

“I remember you told me you had a fail-safe in place. You can’t just use that?”

“You’re talking about the passcode that, ironically, Naegi suggested to me one time. I’m afraid I’m not able to make use of that because the virus has completely locked everything down. And there is technically another option, but again, I’m unable to make use of it.”

Chiaki spirits grew lower and lower while Miaya shot down any kind of hope in this situation. “There must be some way…”

“Well, there is some positive aspect to this.” Chiaki perked up immediately. “Even if their avatars die in the simulation, it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re dead in real life. If someone stops the virus, there might be a way to save their minds and restore their bodies. But… I don’t see a way that can be done if things are like they are now…”

Chiaki put a finger to her chin, an idea forming in her head. If they weren’t completely dead, then it came down to ending the game and thwarting the virus. “Miaya, you said you couldn’t stop the game, but is there any possible way to stop it at all?”

Miaya eyed the table for a moment before Usami said, “Short of destroying the island, there isn’t a way to stop it from the outside. Although, there are a couple of ways to stop it from the inside. Still, at this point, I don’t think either option can be relied on.”

“Still, tell me what they are, please.”

Miaya looked reluctant to make Usami speak again. “Well, one has to deal with the passcode. If you have the correct number of people, you can trigger a reset of the system that would get rid of the virus and let me regain control. But, the problem with that is their avatar would be destroyed and they’d go back to being the Remnants of Despair.”

Chiaki shifted her eyes. “And the other option?”
“Graduation. That way, the memories their avatars made become the real ones and replace their identities as Despairs. It’s the final process for those undergoing rehabilitation in the program. It’s not viable though because it requires the teacher’s permission, which is currently whoever controls Monokuma. If it really is Junko Enoshima, no way she’ll agree to that.”

And just like that, a road map of victory drew itself in Chiaki’s head. For better or worse, she knew Junko and remembered what Izuru said. This “game” Chisa and Izuru kept telling her about made sense now.

What she had in mind bordered on insane, but she stood, looked at Miaya with determined eyes, and said, “Miaya, put me in the Neo World Program!”

Chiaki expected Miaya to gasp or look at her like she grew another head. Instead, the therapist sighed with a half-smile. She must’ve realized the gamer would ask for this after seeing the killing game; the therapist knew her well after all. “Chiaki, you know I absolutely and unequivocally have to decline that request.”

“You must have another way into the program, Miaya. You’re the type of person to take extra measures with everything, so you can get me in another way, I believe.”

Miaya moved Usami’s monitor, opting to speak with her actual soft voice. “It’s not an issue of if I can get you in—and I’m truly not sure if I even could—but that it’s suicide if I do put you in. The program is under the virus’s control so who knows what it’d do if someone tried to infiltrate it now? Even if you got in, you’d have no more power than your classmates. The virus is the teacher now, meaning it has complete control baring a few rules that restrict it. Not to mention your classmates that have already shown they’re willing to murder under specific circumstances. Don’t you understand that you getting in is complicated, and getting out is a thousand times more complicated?”

“But…still…”

“You have nothing to prove anymore. Yukizome isn’t here forcing you to do anything, and Junko Enoshima isn’t going to hurt you any longer. You’re someone who’s had to endure things few people can, and now you have a safe exit. After everything you’ve been through, there is absolutely no shame in exiting this “game” as you put it. Just…walk away from this, Chiaki… please.”

Miaya was right. What obligation did she have to continue this game anymore? Her friends willingly put themselves in there and likely won’t be themselves again, Chisa wasn’t holding her a
gunpoint, and the Future Foundation wouldn’t bother her. Ever since the beginning, she was always just someone who wanted to play games in peace. She never asked for any of this. She never asked to have friends only to have them taken, to suffer inhumane agony both physically and mentally, to serve as the puppet of a woman she once held dear, to quell the whims of Izuru Kamakura, and she certainly never asked to know Junko Enoshima.

With all that in mind…why couldn’t she walk away from this? Chiaki wondered this endlessly. She always asked herself that question in these situations. With Kitta, Mukuro, and a plethora of other times, even with Chisa breathing down her neck, she could’ve just quit. At this moment, she could tell Miaya never mind, and fly off to safety for the rest of her days.

But, once again, that voice in her head started playing. The voice of Junko, ringing in her ears like a chorus of anguish. She didn’t know why she couldn’t ignore it. Chiaki didn’t want to accept it, but Chisa was right about one thing for sure. Junko did leave a mark on her. And because of that, the desire to stop her like she couldn’t back then burned hotter than any high score she wanted to achieve in a game.

“I’m sorry, Miaya…but I can’t. I can’t run away from this game and let Junko do what she pleases with my friends again.”

Miaya looked crestfallen. “But why? During your story, you said Izuru Kamakura told you you’d lose, right? Why do you want to do this if even he says there’s no hope?”

Ironically, Izuru gave her hope in one way. “He said that, but his actions say otherwise. He’s someone that acts based on what he thinks will give interest him. He said I didn’t have a chance… but he still put himself in the Neo World Program. To me, that’s him saying he’s counting on me to prove him wrong again. That he knows me being there has a chance to stop Junko.”

The therapist still seemed reluctant as she remained silent, likely trying to use her intelligent brain to come up with another reason to disagree. But that was okay. Chiaki didn’t expect Miaya to approve of what she wanted to do.

“For so long now,” said Chiaki, “it feels like I’ve been doing things because others made me, and not because I choose to. This is the first time I’m choosing to head into danger on my own free will. This…this is something I really want to do, I know it!”

Chiaki said that to persuade Miaya, but as she said it, she realized something. In a way, she validated everything Chisa worked towards and said about her. Even if they were apart, it still felt like the housekeeper was leading her somehow despite Chiaki wanting to do this. Perhaps her
wanting to do this is something Chisa planned all along.

With her face still racked with indecision, Miaya said, “As a therapist, I’m supposed to advise you. I vehemently disagree with going through with this…but I also won’t deny the fact getting you in the Neo World Program is within my power. Keep in mind this method would put you in even more danger than your friends. So, Chiaki, knowing where I stand and the odds against you…is this something you want…?”

Chiaki stood firm, her palms on the table. “… I always thought my talent, the Ultimate Gamer, wasn’t that impressive. But now I’m about to play the most important game of my life. Ms. Yukizome said Junko and I were opposites, and I could exploit her weakness. I don’t know what that means, but I know I can find out. So please, Miaya, let me be the Ultimate Gamer…and put me in this game so I can save my friends and beat Junko Enoshima!”

“So,” said Miaya, not meeting her eyes, “you had this kind of side to you. Still, this is the only time since that day you tried to standing up on your own that I’ve seen you so confident…”

Chiaki couldn’t tell what the therapist would do. She had her eyes closed, almost like she was meditating. Then she rolled her wheelchair past Chiaki, heading towards the cockpit. The gamer raised an eyebrow, not sure what this meant.

She discussed something with the pilot for over a minute before coming back to the table. Before Chiaki could ask what Miaya discussed, she gripped the seat as the jet turned around. “What’s going on?” Chiaki asked.

“Change of plans.” Miaya, her smile on looking half genuine, said, “We have a game to get you to.”
Chiaki sat quietly with her hands folded into her lap as Miaya talked on the phone with Kyosuke himself.

After the therapist announced news of her escape had finally spread in the Future Foundation, she received a call from the vice chairman himself. The gamer observed Miaya calmly converse with Kyosuke, amazed by how well Miaya explained how she had nothing to do with it. Her skill with lying reminded her of Chisa, accept this wouldn’t end in a dead body around the corner.

But of course, if Kyosuke was on the other line, that could only mean Chisa was looming beside him, listening as well. The housekeeper likely told Kyosuke to ask Miaya about her escape. The gamer gulped picturing Chisa on the other end with a satanic look, her haunting presence palpable even in the sky.

“I’ll make sure to keep you posted,” said Miaya. She did use Usami to talk at first, but Miaya switched to using her real voice for some reason. “Good luck on your end.” After Miaya hung up, she pinched her nose, sighing. “I’ll hand it to Yukizome: she’s anything but lacking in foresight.”

“I thought you were talking to the vice chairman.”

“I was at first. He started questioning me about your escape, asking if I knew anything. I seemed to convince him I was innocent, but then Chisa began speaking and demanded I use my real voice.”

“So that’s why, thought Chiaki. “And then what? Do you think they know?”

“I can’t be sure. I’m sure I didn’t contradict myself, but I don’t know… It wouldn’t surprise me if that failed to convince her and she still suspects me anyway.”

“Then does that mean getting me into the Neo World Program is impossible now?”

“No, the only people that know where we need to go is me and a few other trusted people.”
Despite Miaya’s assurance, Chiaki didn’t feel good about this. Once again, someone may have to suffer because they were close to her. “You’re in this because of me… Sorry.”

Miaya waved her hand. “It was my choice to rescue you and lie just now. If anything, I realize now that the only injustice here is what’s happened to you. As it pertains to me helping you, the only thing I regret is not following my gut in the first place.”

Chiaki smiled, before her eyes drifted toward the ground, recalling another problem. “But won’t you be exposed once I’m put into the game? When the Future Foundation sees me in the Neo World Program—”

“That won’t be a problem. You see, I designed a backdoor into the program that allows the user to digitally transfer their minds into the A.I. Since the A.I has already taken the form of Chiaki Nanami; there should be no problems. Plus, even if the A.I. wasn’t you, they still wouldn’t be able to tell since it’s only your mind being sent.”

Out of all the reasons to be nervous about doing this, knowing she could technically be in her own body and Miaya won’t be in any additional danger helped calm the gamer.

“Now,” said Usami, appearing again as Miaya commanded, “I think it’s best we go over your game plan since we won’t be arriving at our destination for another hour. Chiaki, do you know what you’re going to do once you get in the Neo World Program?”

Chiaki wanted to give an intelligent and awesome speech about how she’s planned every one of her moves and counters to whatever Junko would throw at her in the program…but as usual, she made it up as she went along. Just a few hours ago, she almost resigned herself to sitting in a jail cell forever.

The gamer wanted to hide her incompetent, but Miaya picked up on it as she laughed. “Improvisation has its merits, Chiaki, but if there was ever a time you need to have somewhat of an idea what you’ll do, it’s now. Don’t you always go into a video game with a strategy?”

“Hmm, a lot of games in the same genre tend to be the same. The same strategy used in one role-playing game tends to work for most of them. But I’ve never done anything like a virtual reality death game.”
“As you’ve said, you have a good idea of how Enoshima does things. So, knowing she’s the boss you’ll go against, what’s the best way to ensure the ending is everyone graduating? Remember, graduation can only happen with the teacher’s permission, so unless she signs off on it, there’s no chance.”

Chiaki put a finger her chin, thinking on it. “She’ll do it if it’s a game. More than anything, Junko does things that’ll accommodate her interest kinda like Kamakura. If I convince her to play a final game against hope and despair with me, I can catch her as Naegi did in the mutual killing game.”

“And you think if you win, she’ll just go along with that if she loses?”

Chiaki crossed her arms, understanding Miaya’s point. Even if she did beat her, no way Junko would smile as she let her friends out while shaking her hand for the victory. No way in hell that would happen. Meaning, she’d have to force the blond mastermind into doing it somehow. Chiaki closed her eyes, furrowing her brow in frustration. An answer wasn’t coming to her.

“I don’t mean to pile on too much, my dear, but there’s also the issue of your classmates. Don’t forget this is a death game, meaning they could go from being allies to enemies in the blink of an eye.”

“Maybe I could call them in private one-on-one and explain the truth.”

“That’s not wise. Monokuma has ears everywhere in the program, so much so that even the Usami inside the program is unable to tell them the truth. And even if you did, there’s no guarantee they’ll believe you. They suspect a traitor is in their midst now working for the Future Foundation which they think is the cause of everything, and if you come out with all this information you shouldn’t know, they’ll conclude you’re the traitor. If they do, well…who knows what actions they’ll take…”

“They would never—” Chiaki stopped herself, the cruelty of the killing game highlights playing in her head. She wanted to yell that her classmates could never do that. But after witnessing how Junko manipulated and preyed on them, she couldn’t rule out that even Hajime might react badly to the truth.

“Telling them what their real-world counterparts have done would be too much for them. And keep in mind that you are the traitor they’re referring to. But Enoshima twisted the truth into making it seem like we’re all responsible for this. Explaining the truth is too risky a move right now.”
Chiaki nodded. “Yeah, it’s best if I try to act like the A.I is for the time being. Should I avoid letting Junko know it’s the real me too?”

“Hmm, I’m afraid it doesn’t matter. The backdoor won’t go undetected with how much control she has over things right now. Honestly, I doubt I could even get you in until you told me how important this “game” is. Now I’m thinking she’ll just let you in…which actually worries me even more.”

Miaya looked unsure, much the same as Chiaki. The more they talked about this, the crazier it seemed. This felt like that rainy day when she confronted Junko the first time, only now it’s like Junko rolled out the red carpet to her execution and Chiaki willingly walked down it.

“Really, if you want to walk away from this, all you have to do is say it. One word and you can put all this behind you.”

Chiaki looked out the window, staring at her reflection. “No, my chances of winning are about as low as hitting the jackpot, but if I let Junko win…I don’t think anywhere will be safe…”

The ride in Miaya’s jet continued while Chiaki and the therapist bounced ideas about what actions to take in the Neo World Program. Of course, if even Izuru didn’t see a way to win, maybe there wasn’t any practical way to beat Junko. To win, the gamer needed to defy the odds once more. Izuru said she did it before when resisting Kitta’s brainwashing and the time Mukuro decided to protect her. Chiaki didn’t know what to make of it since, at the time, all she wanted to do was survive. If she were to compare it to a game, it’d be like when a game has multiple routes and your decisions can determine what ending you get. The gamer didn’t have a clue how she did it, but the answer must lie somewhere in the actions she took.

*What could it have been?* thought Chiaki. *With Takara, I had Ms. Yukizome help me, and all I wanted was to move forward to rescue everyone. Against Mukuro, I wanted her to realize her sister’s cruelty and live her own life. But where in those events did I do something Kamakura didn’t expect…?*

While Chiaki thought about it, she decided to prepare herself for the upcoming game in another way. She really didn’t want to, but the gamer reviewed the killing game again for two reasons: The first is she needed to recall an event if anybody in the program asks her about it, and the second is she needed to study how her A.I. acted. Like Miaya said, the others suspected a traitor which meant any odd behavior could be a deterrent.

However, Chiaki couldn’t shake how uncanny watching herself on screen was, like watching a
dream—or a nightmare in this case. The A.I. was the spinning image of herself from when she first arrived at Hope’s Peak Academy. The massive stress from almost the past couple years, replaced by the blank expression he had from being a shut-in with no friends for so many years.

“Miaya?” asked Chiaki, “does the A.I retain memories the real me has?”

“Sort of,” said Usami with a paw on her chin. “It contains the combined memories of all the participants. So, from the perspective of the A.I., the final memories it should have is your execution.”

“I see…” Chiaki couldn’t help but feel sorry for the A.I. Did she have the same feelings she had of regret and grief? What was it like coming into existence knowing you’re a fake and thinking the real you died in such a cruel way? If she was a copy of Chiaki, she must feel that way because she shared the same sorrow of the past every day.

Miaya, as perceptive as always, made Usami said, “Don’t feel sorry for the other Chiaki. It might know your tragic fate, but I made her to rehabilitate and assist those inside. She doesn’t feel grief about what happened. I anticipated patients might want to see a deceased one.”

Chiaki wanted to believe Miaya’s words, but upon observing the A.I. and her actions, it made her think twice. She might’ve been a little more aloof than her, but the two were incredibly similar. It could’ve been the A.I. emulating her behavior…but still. “Her pain looks so real, though…”

“Yes…I will admit the emotions she displays are very convincing, much more developed than when the game started. I’m not sure if it’s the virus messing with the program or perhaps a consequence of the Neo World Program still being in its beta version…but bizarre occurrences like that have been happening often.”

And another negative for entering herself in this game appeared. Chiaki wished she had one of her game consoles to alleviate her mind. “I wonder if the Konami code would help in this situation?”

“Konami what?”

“Never mind.”

“Well, regardless, I don’t think there’s much else to discuss. You know the stakes and are still
willing to do this, so you should relax before we start. Once you enter, you’ll have to be on alert constantly.” Miaya’s eyes widened for a moment. “Oh, and I almost forgot. I was in a tight position at the time, so I didn’t get a chance to include this in your belongings.”

Chiaki’s eyes lit up once she saw Miaya pull her beloved Game Girl out of her pocket. The gamer wasted no time taking the game once she handed it to her, holding it firmly in her hand as if it would dissolve if she didn’t. Seeing her excitement, made Miaya laugh. “Glad to see that part of you hasn’t changed,” she said.

Chiaki, for a little bit at least, lost herself in her favorite game, a calm before the absolute massive storm of despair she headed in to. Considering her day consisted of escaping from jail and witnessing the killing game involving her friends, her nerves were ready to explode. Just for a little while, she let herself be the simple gamer who’s only concerned with topping her high score, the best way she knew to help ease the endless reasons to be anxious in the crazy world she lived in.

Some time passed—the gamer didn’t know since she loses herself in games—before she heard Usami yelled, “We’ve arrived!”

Chiaki broke out of her trance, coming back to the real world. “So, where are we, some super-secret island?”

“Nope, you should recognize the area since we’re around where my base is.”

Chiaki tilted her head. “But why? If I walk in there, won’t everybody—”

“Don’t worry about that. Where we’re going is in the vicinity, but we don’t have to go inside. Not a soul will see you.”

The jet descended, and a look out of the window showed a familiar rural area. One neat thing about Miaya’s base is how it’s one of the few that isn’t in a purely urban area. The jet landed in an opening near the small forest. Chiaki didn’t see any kind of facility that could get her inside the Neo World Program. Still, Miaya said to follow her off the plane. The gamer followed the therapist as her wheelchair rolled down a dirt path. Walking down a path to an underground area reminded her of doing the same thing with Nagito that day. Funnily enough, this would also end her meeting Junko again, a kind of coincidence someone like Chisa would get a laugh out of.

Finally, the path opened into a small area where a pair of doors lied in the ground just like a storm
cellar. The doors had a lock on them that Miaya wasted no time unlocking with a key in her coat pocket, revealing some stairs leading into darkness. Now the nasty nostalgia of that day really bothered Chiaki, much like elevators did at times.

“Unfortunately, this place isn’t wheelchair accessible,” said Miaya, getting out of her wheelchair. Chiaki only saw this once before when Miaya ushered the gamer to ride in her wheelchair back during her convalescence. Since she always sat in the wheelchair and wore her heavy coat, Chiaki forgot just how small Miaya’s body was. Chiaki bet she’d be confused as a child by someone who didn’t know her because of her small stature. “Mind giving me a hand, Chiaki?” she said in her soft voice.

Chiaki gave the therapist a shoulder to lean on as the duo gingerly walked down the stairs. The moment they hit the floor, bright lights on the walls turned on one by one revealing a long, narrow hallway. It reminded Chiaki of some secret lab you’d see in science fiction. “The Future Foundation isn’t hiding aliens from space, are they?”

Miaya giggled. “Hardly, though with everything that’s been happening behind the scenes, I’m starting to wonder.” The therapist pointed forward with her bony finger. “The lab is a straight shot from here. Let’s make haste.”

Chiaki, still supporting Miaya, walked down the hallway. This slow, silent walk towards her destination felt almost like the buildup to the fast lane of insanity about to happen. “Hey, Miaya, would it be daytime for everyone in the Neo World Program now?”

“No, the day ended a while ago which happens to work in our favor. I don’t know what the process of you injecting yourself into the A.I. will be like, so it’s fortunate she’s probably by herself in her dorm.”

“… What’ll happen to her? Will she just…vanish?”

“No, she’ll just be inactive.”

“I feel bad for just shutting her out like that since it looks like she’s connected with everyone.”

“Ironically, this could make her happy. The real you being alive and going to help her friends? I’m sure she’d understand. I programmed that A.I to always have the well-being of those around her in mind, and it’s like you said, the best thing for your classmates is for you to be there to defeat Junko
“Enoshima.”

“Which I’m still not sure how I’ll do it…”

“We can still turn back, you know? Just say the word and we’ll be thousands of miles from her by sun up.”

Chiaki shook her head. “I’ve come this far. No way I’m a quitting when the final dungeon is ahead of me.”

“Hehe, well despite not having a clear view of what you want to do, you’ve managed to make it this far by being yourself. I don’t see why that’d stop working now.”

She didn’t know why, but when Miaya said that, the words stuck in Chiaki’s head. Chisa always alluded to a similar thing about her getting past obstacles by being herself. But it’s not until the therapist said it now that Chiaki realized she had gotten past everything like that. Against Kitta, Mukuro, or an array of other troubles, she always approached it by just doing what she thought would help. *Always being myself… Is that the key to beating Junko? But…what does that even—*

“The lab is just ahead,” said Miaya, a pair of steel doors in front of them. The therapist leaned off Chiaki. “I can do the rest. The pod that’ll put you in the Neo World Program are behind those doors.”

Chiaki gulped in anticipation as Miaya went to a control panel, putting her hand on a panel and putting one of her blue eyes up to a scanner. The doors slid open a few seconds later to reveal a room full of all kinds of technology cramped in a small space. It reminded her of her room filled with game consoles, her mother always saying what a fire hazard it was. Chiaki didn’t know what machine did what, but the therapist quickly went to a giant keyboard and began inputting commands. Then, Chiaki’s eyes drifted towards a machine shaped like a pod. The door on top slid open, revealing a space big enough for a human to lie in.

“Is…” murmured Chiaki, her hands pressed to her chest. “Is that it…?”

“Yes,” said Miaya. She smiled, probably to encourage Chiaki not to worry, but the therapist had the same wry look in her eyes instead of her usual warm stare. Without a doubt, she hoped Chiaki would renege and choose to run away. “… Anytime you’re ready, you can lie down inside of it.”
“…Right.” Chiaki didn’t have a fear of heights or any kind of notable phobias, but she now understood what it must feel like. As she looked at the machine that’d take her into the Neo World Program, all the determination and conviction she had coming here draining out of her like a pool full of holes.

Up to this point, it hadn’t truly occurred to her what she was doing. If she stepping in that machine, what awaited her was a hostile enjoyment she had no real plan for that contained Junko Enoshima herself. One thing could go right, and a million things could go wrong. Anyone of her friends could plausible kill her in there, and Junko would have a front row seat. Her stomach became queasy, her feet wouldn’t move forward, and all the things that could go wrong acted as walls slowly closing in on her.

“I should confess something to you, Chiaki. I planned for you to have this kind of reaction once we got here, or rather I hoped you would. I didn’t think you’d hesitate like you are because you’re weak, but because your natural inclination to survive would resist you. Chiaki…this is not some kind of game. The odds are unfair and you will really die. I’m going to say it a final time…turn around and walk away. There is absolutely no shame in doing so.”

While she couldn’t move forward…she couldn’t move backward either. Paralyzed, the gamer became cemented to the ground in a complete stasis of indecision. Yes, the gravity of it all pressed down on her…but she had one of her feelings. She didn’t know why, but if she didn’t do this, something much worse would happen. Her body began to move forward like it did the other times she walked into a situation stacked against her. And then, something pushed her forward, almost like her classmates, Hajime, and the real Chisa ushered her forward.

The next thing she knew, her body was in the pod, ready to go.

“Chiaki…” murmured Miaya, her eyes closed.

“I’m sorry, Miaya, but I can’t…I won’t turn back.”

Miaya stood over her, still gazing at her with regretful eyes. She wanted to say something, but Chiaki wouldn’t change her mind. “…The way this machine connects with the Neo World Program is different from the others. Unlike your classmates, who relate to it directly, your mind will be wirelessly sent into the program, meaning…” Miaya had the most sorrow filled face she’d ever seen. “Meaning if you die, there’s zero chance you’ll ever come back…!”

That final shot must’ve been Miaya’s last chance to get Chiaki to back out, but the gamer didn’t falter at all. She expected that to be the case. It’s not like it mattered since if Junko beats her, she’s
as good as dead anyway.

After a few moments of Chiaki not answering, Miaya said, “... Make sure not to make any sudden movements. This process will be quick, and when you come to, you'll be in the game. Once you're inside, confide with Usami privately because she’ll understand the situation, hopefully. Also, the machine will preserve your body. Good luck, Chiaki...”

“Wait,” said Chiaki before Miaya walked away. “Thanks for everything you’ve done for me. You were the first face I saw when I woke up from my coma, and I couldn’t have been luckier. You saved me from falling into despair so many times, and I couldn’t have asked to be a better person in my life. Please, leave the Future Foundation and go into hiding after this. Ms. Yukizome will try something.”

Miaya laughed, her back facing the gamer. “Everything that you’ve gone through and you’re up against, and you’re still so concerned with others... Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever been as close with someone on a personal level than you. I’m not the best in social situations, as I’ve told you...” Miaya turned to reveal a smile with teary eyes. “I’m glad I met you, Chiaki Nanami...but I won’t leave everyone behind, same as you.”

Chiaki wanted to say more but Miaya closed the pod. A pang surged through her heart. She didn’t want to believe it but at that moment...it seemed like the last time she’d ever see her therapeutic best friend.

What happened next was a sensation akin to vertigo overtook the gamer as the pod hummed to life, like when she’d take her despair exposure sensation except there wasn’t any discomfort. Chiaki closed her eyes, and let her mind drift into the digital void.

_I’m on my way, everyone...!_

VVV

There was nothing at first, just darkness. Then, gradually, the pieces around her came together one pixel at a time. With every passing second, everything began to piece to gather into a coherent picture. It was nothing at first, but then the image became more vivid. And finally, more darkness surrounding her before she opened her eyes.

“Hmm...?” she hummed, raising her head off a pillow and sitting up. Chiaki rubbed her eyes,
trying to clear her blurry vision before she observed her surroundings. The room around her was small, containing a bed, a television with a game console, and a few other usual things you’d see in her old room. Chiaki walked to the window to see a familiar building in front of a pool.

Then she quickly walked to the bathroom. What awaited her in the mirror was the image of her younger self. As if someone plucked her out of the past, the reflection in the mirror revealed the Chiaki Nanami of old. Her skin had her pale complexion, her eyes had a plain glow about them, she wore her favorite hoodie with black stockings, and she checked her body to see the scars from her execution had vanished completely.

Chiaki knew for sure at that moment, she had entered the program.

*It feels so real,* she thought, squeezing her palms together and touching the walls. She turned on the faucet and put her hand under the cool water. She knew it was fake, kept telling herself it was fake, but her brain said otherwise. The realism she witnessed impressed her so much, she started wondering if she dreamt the past two years up. *I can’t believe how incredible this looks. If I didn’t know this wasn’t real, I’d never tell the difference.*

The gamer touched her Gala Omega hairclip, a perfect recreation of the real one in Izuru’s grasp. She grabbed her pink backpack, also a perfect replica. She also raised an eyebrow when she noticed a different feature of her body. More specifically, one of her more noticeable assets. Chiaki put an arm underneath her bosoms before comparing with her real ones. *They’re bigger now…*

Chiaki left the bathroom and continued to interact with everything in her room. She turned on the television, messed around with her game, and jumped on the bed before wrapping herself in the sheets. Never once had any of these things felt or looked any different from their real-world counterparts. Truly, the Neo World Program got every detail down to the specks of dust right.

Chiaki lied in the bed, staring at the roof with an absentminded look. After thinking her friends were gone forever for so long, she could visit them right now. Hajime, in fact, rested a few doors down from her. Though the time had gotten late and she figured everyone wanted to rest after today’s events. Just yesterday, Mikan’s execution happened after she killed Ibuki and Hiyoko. The gamer tightened her palms, wishing she could’ve gotten her sooner.

Chiaki stepped out of bed and put on her pink shoes before opening the door. She wanted to visit someone tonight, and she figured now was the perfect time with everyone in their homes. No one was around as she walked to the gate and walked on the dirt path towards her desired destination. Another facet of this place is eyes were on her constantly; the Future Foundation is the audience to this killing game. So, she’d have to hope the person she wanted to see agreed to a private conversation.
Finally, after minutes of walking, she arrived at the park, the giant statue with the timer on it the centerpiece. She gazed around one more time to make sure none of her friends were around before taking a deep breath, preparing herself for what she was about to do. It might’ve been a risky play, but it likely didn’t matter considering what Miaya said about how this place worked now. Besides…this is a meeting Chiaki needed to harden her resolve even more.

So, she gazed at the fake starry heavens above before yelling, “Monokuma!”

Within seconds, as he materialized out of nowhere, the black and white symbol of the Despairs said, “You rang?”

Chiaki furrowed her brow at the sight of him. Just seeing the crass bear made her temper rise. “You know why I’ve come here, don’t you?”

“Hmm?” hummed Monokuma, putting a paw to his chin. “Are we playing a guessing game? Then again you are the Ultimate Gamer, so you probably get a kick out of these things. Let’s see…the only reason a young girl like you has come to meet a dashing bear like me in the middle of the night must be…a confession of love!”

Chiaki didn’t react, refusing to play along with Monokuma usual antics.

“Hahaha, what can I say, the ladies just can’t help but resist such a strong bear like me, filled with testosterone and manliness. Why I was just telling that my idiot sister Monomi yesterday how I—”

“Knock it off, Junko,” Chiaki spoke quietly enough so that anyone looking at this couldn’t hear, but audible enough for Monokuma to pick it up. Judging by his sudden silence, he heard her loud and clear. “You have control over this program so you must’ve noticed when I entered the Neo World Program. You must know I’m the real me right now. So…show me the real you.”

Monokuma stayed silent, his arms behind his back. He stared at the ground for a few moments before he said, “Hmm, very interesting indeed. Should I act this quickly? Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to humor you. Just give me a second to close of all the feeds to this spot, make sure all those bastards in their houses, and…presto!” Monokuma’s body began to glow. “I’m still working out the kinks, but for this…I should have enough to at least…!”

Chiaki covered her eyes, a bright flash of light erupting where Monokuma stood. The bright
luminesce lasted for a few seconds before the light faded. Another figure stood where Monokuma just was, and the sight made the breath leave Chiaki’s body as her blood froze.

“It’s been a while, eh, nobody?” said the dreaded voice of Junko Enoshima, flicking her blond hair as she examined her own body. “The star makes her appearance! I worried I wouldn’t make the transition so soon, but it came out pretty good. But, of course, anything involving me always comes out well.”

Bile rose in Chiaki’s mouth as her skin crawled. The woman in front of her might not have been the genuine Junko Enoshima, but like everything else in the Neo World Program, the imitation was real enough to fool her. She had the same plastic smile, eyes that wanted to pierce through someone in every way, and even the same perfume she wore that day wafted in the air. The gamer’s body shook from the floodgates of emotion that opened within her.

Junko put a hand on her hip, gazing Chiaki up and down. “So, you actually had the stones to come in here and try to disrupt my beautiful game? I’d think you of all people would’ve learned from last time I turned you into swiss cheese. Just know when I execute this time…no one is saving you.”

Chiaki shook her head. “I came in here to stop you from causing my friends any more harm! I won’t let it end like back then… I won’t let you do what you wish with my friends! That’s why I’ve come to challenge you to this game, and if I win…you’re going to let us graduate! If I lose…then you can do what you want…”

Junko threw the gamer off when she started laughing. “You really don’t know anything, do you? You don’t know the true nature of this game; you don’t know what to do now that you were dumb enough to trap yourself in here…you don’t even know the real reason you’ve been allowed to live this long…”

What? thought Chiaki. “I’ve been allowed to live this long? How much do you know about what’s happened to me?”

“Enough, courtesy of my creator.”

Chiaki guessed she meant Izuru. “Then why have I been allowed to live, and what are you really planning?”

Junko shook her finger. “You know a game is no fun if you’re just given all the plot points early.
It’s like you said, you’ve come to challenge me like the gamer dweeb you are. Heh, you are aware that your chump friends have already torn each other apart. What difference do you think you could make at this point?”

“It’s like Kamakura said, I’m the one who can defy the odds, not you. And…it’s like Ms. Yukizome said: you’ve never given me a fair game because…I’m the one you’re afraid of!”

Finally, Junko’s reaction gave her some satisfaction. Gone was her smile, replaced by a dry stare. Chiaki didn’t even fully believe what she said about Junko fearing her, but Junko believed she did which was all the mattered.

“…Hehe, I’m glad you’re here, Chiaki. This game began to get a little stale. The A.I. version did provide a nice substitute, but making the real you feel despair again… I’m starting to feel motivated! I’m gonna break you bit by bit until you’re on your knees, begging for me put you out of your misery. Just the thought has me all hot and excited…” Junko stuck out her arms a ghastly grin plastered on her face. “You’re gonna wish you stayed dead, nobody!”

“Junko…I promise…” Chiaki took a deep breath before glaring at the blonde mastermind. “I will beat you this time!”

The two stood parallel to each other, neither one wavering, the fake wind blowing harshly. At last, another game between Chiaki Nanami and Junko Enoshima had finally started.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes

And that’s another arc done! So yeah, a whole lot of stuff happened in this arc. Chiaki rebelled, the inner workings of Chisa got some spotlight, Chiaki met Izuru, Chiaki looks to be done with the Future Foundation, our dear gamer went to jail only to get broken out by a therapist, now she’s in a killing game in a digital world, and I severely paraphrased all the nutty stuff that happened… Danganronpa progression at its finest!

But yeah, things have progressed a lot and the finale of this long story is drawing very near. For now, though, I get to write about my favorite installment in the franchise! But knowing what happens in that game, how could there be a happy end…? Wait and see! And lastly, expect skits at the end of the next chapter as usual. Until next time, wonderful readers!
Interesting differences between her real body versus the digital one became apparent to Chiaki. For one, normal desires like hunger or thirst didn’t exist in the same way it did from her in the real world. She could see something tasty or want to drink something, but the feeling of needing to do that vanished. Another oddity was the weird sensations of exhaustion she’d get randomly. Her vision would get blurry, mild dizziness would set in, and she’d blank out without even realizing it. This only lasted for a few seconds at a time whenever it happened, so it wasn’t a crucial issue.

Everything else worked the same for the most part. The salty air of the digital Jabberwock island tickled her skin, the waves roared as they crashed against the shore, the wafts of fresh air filled her lungs, and even her sight improved to a degree. It was like she jumped out of her scarred, damaged body into a fresh new copy.

Her mind stayed on the task at hand: stopping the A.I version of Junko from enacting her plans. After Chiaki confronting the blond mastermind in the park last night, Junko said more taunting words before disappearing. Chiaki departed back to her home, lying in bed with her thoughts racing. Since she could accomplish nothing in the late hours, she fit perfectly into some pajamas in the dresser and forced herself to sleep—an easy task since she felt exhausted.

After a dreamless sleep, she awoke when she heard chatter from outside. She recognized those voices the moment it hit her ears. Her heartbeat rose as she wondered what her next move would be. Explaining everything was out of the question, so she’d have to act like the A.I would for now. Like Miaya advised, she’d have to seek out a private meeting with Monomi and see if the pink rabbit could assist her in some way.

“Hey, can you move over a bit, Chiaki?”

“Okay,” said Chiaki sliding closer to the edge. …Wait.

It took longer than it should’ve for Chiaki to pause. She was so deep in thought, the incredibly strange thing that just happened didn’t hit her until now. To her knowledge, she went to bed alone. But just now, someone behind her said something. And to make it worse…Chiaki recognized whose voice that was. The gamer shook her head, disregarding the impossible thought in her head. Instead, like pulling off a band-aid, she quickly flipped over to solve this mystery.
And there lied the smiling, sleeping face of Junko Enoshima mere inches from her own.

Chiaki flipped back over, at a loss. She closed her eyes tightly several times, pinched the bridge of her nose, and smack her cheeks. She was awake, so surely that obvious illusion caused by some glitch in the program disappeared. Yes, everything would be fine once she turned around again. So, she turned around again, expecting to see nothing.

And again, the sleeping face of Junko was right there.

“Ah!” gasped Chiaki, backing away so hard, she fell out of the bed and hit the floor. After gathering herself, she scowled at the fake fashionista. “… What are you doing?”

Junko sat up, rubbing her eyes with the same carefree smile as if nothing about this was odd. “Trying to get some shut-eye if it wasn’t for a certain noisy gamer. If you wanted to sleep on the floor, you could’ve done it quieter.”

“… I mean why are you in the bed?”

“Well you see, sleep is a recurring state of body and mind which featured inhibition of nearly all voluntary muscles. For that reason, humans saw fit to have this state of altered consciousness be taken place on a comfortable surface which a bed comes in handy for because—”

Chiaki began to lose her patience. “I meant why are you in my bed?”

Junko shrugged. “Why not?”

Chiaki groaned, kicking herself for not foreseeing this. Of course, Junko would take every liberty she could to taunt the gamer for her own enjoyment, especially considered the gamer declared war on her. She didn’t regret doing that because the desired laid dormant within her for a long time, but dealing with the antics of this insane blond would get tiring, just as it did when she’d see hallucinations of her.

“I know we’re kinda sworn enemies and I ruined your life by brainwashing your friends while nearly killing you…but come on. That doesn’t mean we can’t bond in between all the psychological warfare, right?”
Chiaki rose off the floor. “Dealing with internet trolls is more tolerable than talking with you. At least they make me laugh at times.”

“Someone woke up cranky. You better learn to adapt, Chiaki, because you’ve entered my game now. As it stands, you’re completely at my mercy. Why, I could execute you by the day’s end if I wanted to.”

“No, you can’t. You’ve taken control of the Neo World Program, but even you can’t go against the set rules Miaya programmed into it. Executing me won’t be possible unless I kill someone which will never happen.”

Junko smirked. “Or if those chumps outside take a literal stab at it, hehe.” Junko hugged her shoulders. “Oh, just imagining the unfiltered despair you’d feel losing to me once again at the hands of your classmate…”

“They won’t kill for you anymore. We’ll all unite against you, then there’s nothing you can do anymore. I’ll force you to make us graduate.” Junko laughed, just as she did when Chiaki brought up her endgame yesterday. The gamer figured Junko was acting cocky as always, but she started to wonder.

“You are so in over your head; I’m starting to pity you too much to enjoy the thought of your failure. All this, and that’s what you and Miaya Gekkogahara came up with? You’re denser than that fool Naegi and his idiotic sidekicks.”

“Graduation is the best and most surefire way to beat you. There are many other back-up plans I have to delete you from the Neo World Program.” Chiaki bluffed on that last part, something Junko might’ve picked up on because she stared back at Chiaki unfazed.

“Seriously, I would’ve thought you’d get better at combating despair after being under the tutelage of that crazy bitch.”

“You know about me and Ms. Yukizome too?”

“I know a lot about you, nobody.”
“Then you know I stopped both Kitta Takara and convinced your sister to help me despite how you manipulated her to do bad things.”

Junko’s smiled faded a bit at the mention of Mukuro. “Don’t put me on the same level as Kitta. She isn’t and never was on my level. As for my sister, allow me to personally apologize for having to bear the company of such an unsightly woman. The smell alone must’ve made you despair like crazy.”

“Her company was much better than yours. How could you do something like that to your own sister, someone who cared for you more than I’ve ever seen someone care for anyone? The story she told me about how she grew up was nothing but you using her.”

“Spare me the sentimental bullshit. I never made that eyesore do anything she didn’t want to do. I never held a gun up to her head, though she probably would’ve gotten off on that, the weapon loving freak.” Junko rested her head on her closed palm. “Though, I can see why you’d feel a symmetry with my sister. You’re both insignificant people, desperately vying to be on a pedestal next to someone like me—but you’re cursed to gaze from afar. What a vain existence.”

Chiaki scrunched up her fists, the words of Junko like poison. Even if this wasn’t the real Junko Enoshima, she was close enough to where Chiaki could grasp what having a conversation with the blond felt like. Amazingly, even if most of her life since the Tragedy began revolved around this single woman, this was the first time the two had an extended conversation.

And as they talked, Chiaki grew to hate the way Junko spoke. She’d craft every sentence to get under the skin of who she spoke with, her amazing ability to read people allowing her to tailor whatever she’s saying to almost anybody. And then her false crystal blue eyes would just stare back, always observing, unfazed by any counter-argument. From the outside, someone would think she’s an erratic maniac—but Chiaki quickly realized Junko calculated all her moves to where even a seemingly insignificant action put her two steps ahead of the enemy.

Truly, the woman across from her was the mightiest final boss one could ask for.

However, Chiaki had been through the wringer with despair enough to resist Junko’s disparaging banter. “You’re wrong. In her last moments, Mukuro made a choice she wanted to without your influence motivating her. I believe, in those moments, your hold over her broke. If your sister can resist you, then your despair isn’t as much of a cheat code as you think.”

“Lol, like, really? That’s what you’re putting all your stock into? You bonded with my unsightly sister and you think that’s a sign you can banish my ideology from a person’s mind?” Junko
stepped out of bed, standing parallel to the gamer. She wore pajamas as well, coated in Monokuma faces naturally. “Let me give you this hypothetical: Mukuro is in this room with a gun in her hand, and she has to kill one of us. Which one of us is eating the bullet?”

This exchange reminded her too much of numerous conversations with Chisa. Both would take her argument and strike it down. And just like with Chisa, Chiaki didn’t know what to say. Of course, Mukuro would shoot her instead of Junko. As much as Chiaki liked to think she connected with the soldier, her boundless love for Junko would take longer to overcome than a chaotic day in a forest.

“Exactly,” said Junko, not reading Chiaki’s expression.

The gamer had another counter, however. “Back then, you struggled with finding a purpose too. As much as you talk down to those unsure about their future, at one time, you were the same. What… what happened to you?” Junko wore an inscrutable expression. Chiaki figured she’d press more. “And also… just what about me is different…?”

Junko continued to not react, a rare sight since the blond loved to emote in some way. Chiaki wanted to know those questions badly, despite the high chance Junko wouldn’t give a straight answer. Why would she? The answers to either of those might further point to a glaring weakness Chisa hinted at.

Just as Chiaki lost hope Junko would answer, her lips began to move before a loud knock came from the door, followed by a voice Chiaki would never forget. “Nanami,” said the voice of Hajime, “you okay in there?”

“She… ” murmured Chiaki, short of breath, facing the door. The talk with Junko distracted her from the friends she hadn’t seen in over a year and the fact they were on the other side of the door.

“Heh,” laughed Junko. “Love; one of the greatest sourced of despair. I remember when I was; that didn’t end well for him. Though, I’d never be desperate enough to latch on to a talentless Reserve Course student like Hajime Hinata. I do find his other side very… exciting, though.”

In anger, Chiaki intended to defend Hajime—but the mastermind vanished as if she turned invisible.

“Hey, Nanami!” yelled Hajime. “Can you hear me?”
Chiaki shook her head and refocused herself. “Oh, yeah. Sorry, I overslept.” Chiaki struggled not making her voice tremble. Talking to Hajime again made it troubling to keep her composure, but she needed to act like the more demure A.I. version. Any sudden change in personality would put unwanted attention on her.

“Well, we’re all meeting up in the hotel restaurant to discuss what to do next so come there when you’re ready.”

“Okay. Thanks, Hinata.” Once Hajime walked away, Chiaki fell to her knees, grabbing her chest, overwhelmed by all the emotion she’s gone through since waking up just a few minutes ago. One moment she’s having an intense talk with Junko, the next she’s talking with the boy she considered her first real friend. This all happened before breakfast. “This is gonna be harder than those bullet hell games…”

Chiaki put on her favorite hoodie, pick shoes, and matching backpack, just like her A.I always dressed. Putting on the clothes felt nostalgic since Chiaki rarely wore casual clothes in the Future Foundation. She wanted to soak in how wonderful wearing her old attire and going to meet her friends was like the old days; unfortunately, a clash against despair awaited.

The gamer departed her cabin, taking in the beautiful scenery of the fake Jabberwock. The excellent detail of the Neo World Program never ceased to amaze her. She walked past the houses until she reached the pool, the hotel in front of her. To the left was the place the imposter’s murder took place at the hands of Teruteru. After giving it a sorrowful glance, she continued to the hotel’s restaurant with her poker face on.

She had to bite her tongue to not react as she walked in. Hajime, Sonia, Fuyuhiko, Akane, Gundham, Kazuichi, and Nekomaru all faced her as she entered. Though, Nekomaru might not have been appropriate seeing as how his body was different now. Mechamaru would be a more fitting name considering Monokuma made him into a machine. Despite her happiness, she noticed mostly everyone had brooding looks, likely due to the stressful time they’ve had in this game.

“About fucking time,” said Fuyuhiko. “We were starting to think you got lost.”

“Sorry,” said Chiaki, “my gaming session went pretty last night.” A lie, of course. Fitting that even here, she’d have to tell more lies to those she held dear.

Kazuichi scratched his head. “Man, how the hell can you play games with all the insanity that happened yesterday? Tsumiki got freaking blasted into space after killing Mioda and Saionji! And then there’s what happened to Nidai.”
Sonia looked troubled, her aura as regal and majestic as in real life. “It’s truly horrible how Monokuma just did as he wished with his body. Goodness knows how Nidai feels having his flesh and blood stolen from him…”

In contrast to Sonia’s claim, Nekomaru was smiling without a care in the world while Akane sat next to him scoffing down an assortment of food.

*It’s them as usual,* thought Chiaki who always admired how the duo kept in high spirits in even the most troubling of times. “I’m sure Mechamaru will be fine.”

Hajime raised an eyebrow. “You’ve gotten used to this already?”

Chiaki didn’t mean to, but she caught herself studying Hajime and comparing him with Izuru. The difference between the two was so stark; yet, to her at least, a resemblance did exist that she couldn’t pinpoint exactly.

“Haha, carefree as always, Nanami,” said Nagito, entering the hotel restaurant. He, too, was the spinning image of his real self—something that could be equally good and bad. Based on his actions in this game, Chiaki couldn’t call it good. Besides Junko herself, he’s the biggest wild card the gamer needed to factor in. Especially considering what happened the last time.

“The hell do you have to say?” said Fuyuhiko.

“It’s not my place to speak up when you’re all gathered like this, but I think what Tsumiki said yesterday before her execution needs discussing. You know, the part about her “beloved.” It could just be my own embarrassing cowardice, but it seemed odd at the time.”

Nagito alluded to Mikan’s ambiguous words before her execution started. She claimed she’d be with her “beloved,” and she’d forgive her. For everyone else in the game, they were confused because they didn’t have memories of Hope’s Peak Academy; however, Chiaki was sure of the “beloved” was. Who else could it be but the callous mastermind that corrupted her?

“More importantly,” said Gundham, crossing his arms, his hamsters by his side, “what should we make of this sinister organization called World Ender. This group, also known as the Future Foundation, is responsible for the heinous game. Finding their true identities must be our priority!”
Chiaki winced. Junko already shifted the narrative to the Future Foundation being the enemy, meaning confessing her identity was too risky.

Sonia looked troubled. “I cannot make sense of this. What would a group set on global catastrophe want us to suffer as we have…? Why were we the ones selected for this killing game?”

“They went to a lot of trouble abducting all like this,” said Fuyuhiko. “I’ve seen some cold things go on in the underworld, but this shit is unheard of even for me.”

“And don’t forget,” said Nagito, “several years’ worth of memories was stolen from our time at Hope’s Peak Academy.” A smile crept across Nagito’s face. “And let’s not forget… There’s currently a traitor amongst us working with the Future Foundation…”

Several of them gazed around nervously, almost as if they’d hope to catch the traitor looking guilty. Chiaki kept her stoic face on even though her heart panged strongly after the mention of a traitor. The traitor was her but calling her a “traitor” wasn’t right. Junko lodged the idea too deeply in their minds that the traitor was the enemy.

“Who could it be?” asked Nagito. “Who among us isn’t who they say they are?”

Kazuichi pointed at Nagito. “You’re obviously the most suspicion one here! You’ve done nothing but complicate everything and act like a weirdo the whole time!”

Nagito chuckled, putting his hands up. “Come on, I’ve got nothing to hide. Even an organization like that wouldn’t want anything to do with me. A worthless human being like me just turns others away, but you all know that by now.”

Nagito worried Chiaki. As odd as he seemed, if he had a goal, he’d work towards with an almost scary tenacity. “So,” said Chiaki, “who would you say the traitor is, Komaeda?”

“I say Hinata.”

Hajime looked stunned before he yelled, “What the hell are you saying!”
“You shouldn’t lose your composure like that, Hinata. It makes you look more suspicious.” Nagito spoke in a teasingly way so it was hard to assess how seriously he meant that.

Chiaki wondered if she should’ve stayed silent, but said, “Why should we suspect Hinata? He was a big part in finding out who the culprits were in the previous class trials.”

“Well sure, but isn’t it normal to suspect the most unlikely and enigmatic character? Don’t forget that Hinata is the only one among us who can’t remember his talent. That makes him the odd one out just off that alone.”

Kazuichi touched his chin. “Yeah, that stuff always bothered me too now that you mention it…”

Hajime furrowed his brow. “It’s not my fault I can’t remember my talent.”

“You’re just making yourself more suspicious,” said Nagito.

“Then that’s your fault!”

“Stop this!” yelled Sonia. “You’re playing into Monokuma’s hands by fighting!”

After that, Chiaki gazed at the ground as Nekomaru tried to ease the tension with a bizarre feature Monokuma put in his body. She tried to diffuse the situation when Nagito accused Hajime, but doing so was complicated when she couldn’t speak the truth. From their perspective, the oddity of Hajime’s lack of remembrance drew suspicion. The gamer had to hope for now that Nagito didn’t pursue any further.

“Monokuma sure is a jerk!” shouted the high voice of Monomi, appearing out of thin air as Monokuma would. “He’s just doing as he pleases with people’s bodies…just like he did with me! But don’t fret, Nidai; you get used to it after a while.”

Chiaki had to contain her laughter. After witnessing the pink rabbit act as a mouthpiece for Miaya for so long, Monomi moving autonomously was hard to take seriously. Watching Monomi talk gave her a warm sense of familiarity as if Miaya stood by her side.
“Don’t but in, ya damn bunny!” yelled Akane. “I’ll kill ya till you’re dead!”

“How violent!” squealed Monomi.

“If you’re here,” said Fuyuhiko, “I assume you’ve defeated another one of those Monobeasts and opened up a new island?”

“You betcha! It was a mighty battle, but I pulled through!”

“I ain’t going…” murmured Kazuichi. “What’s the point when all that’s waiting for us is another reason for somebody to murder. I say screw it and don’t go.”

“W-what! But I worked so hard…”

“Silence, fiend!” yelled Gundham. “We will fall for your trickery no longer!”

“Ah damn it!” yelled Monokuma, spontaneously appearing next. Chiaki might’ve imagined it, but it seemed like the bear gave a slight wink in her direction, no doubt Junko’s way of saying some shenanigans were close to ensuing. “Don’t worry! Just leave these rapscallions to your mature and smart big brother!”

“What are you saying! Don’t act like we’re allies or some—” Monomi couldn’t finish her sentence before Monokuma blasted her away.

“Now that the annoyance is gone, I come with some exciting news! I’ve prepared a special treat for your next investigation that’s different from anything you’ve seen before!”

_Uh oh_, thought Chiaki, not liking the sound of that. She expected Junko to try something even stranger when she found out about the gamer’s interference in the game. “…Treat?”

“Oh, you took the bait? Guess it’s true you need a carrot on a stick to get a shut-in out of their room!”
“Will you get on with it!” yelled Fuyuhiko.

“Make sure not to wet your pants in excitement, or if you do don’t get it on me! I’ve prepared a few things you guys would find interesting on the new island! One such item is…clues about the Future Foundation, parts that can be used to build a ship, and your student profiles from your tenures at Hope’s Peak Academy!”

Chiaki froze. A new danger presented itself in front of her. Naturally, if she kept quiet about her origins and didn’t break the kayfabe her A.I. set, no one would suspect her true origins. However, that didn’t mean Junko couldn’t. She knew the ship parts was nonsense since this world didn’t have anything beyond it other than Jabberwock…but their student profiles and information about the Future Foundation… This could be problematic.

“If you got it, then get to it you bastards, ahahaha!” With that, Monokuma vanished.

These “special treats” worried her, but they probably sounded promising to the others. “… What should we do?” she said.

“We gotta go, obviously!” yelled Kazuichi. “If there’s a chance I can find some parts and get a ship, we can escape this hellish island once and for all.”

Nagito nodded. “I definitely plan on exploring. This Future Foundation is too interesting to let an opportunity like this pass.” The lucky student eyed Hajime. “What are you going to do? If you find your student profile, you might be able to clear the suspicion surrounding you.”

“No one here suspects me but you… Still, I am interested. I think I’ll go look around the island too.”

“Looks like you’re all prepared for the worst!” said Nekomaru. “I admire the convictions.”

Akane pounded her knuckles. “That obviously means we’re going too!”

Sonia put her hands in her lap. “If everyone wishes to explore, I will accompany you all as well. Perhaps an answer to our woes does lie there.”
Chiaki wanted to say otherwise, but everyone was set on going. For now, she’d roll with this. “Let’s just be careful for any traps Monokuma placed.”

Everyone nodded before exiting the restaurant after finishing their meals. The only one left was Chiaki, not ready to leave just yet. She took a deep breath, exhaustion threatening her already. Keeping up the stoic ruse and talking to her classmates casually wasn’t easy. The desire to tell them the truth was great, but she had to hold it in.

After settling down, she noticed the memorial Hiyoko made after Mahiru died. The memorial looked more like a structure you’d find in an occult kid’s basement, but Hiyoko’s good intentions usually turned out strange—no doubt from the lack of practice. Chiaki grabbed one of the photos, admiring how Mahiru could capture so much emotion in a single picture. The gamer closed her eyes, thinking of the memories she had with her and the others that’ve already lost this game.

“Such a shame really,” said Junko, sitting with her laced heels propped on the table. “The redhead was one of the more challenging ones to fully turn into a Despair, so I wanted her to stay until the end so I could break her down all over again. For the best though; I hate freckles. My sister kinda ruined that for me.”

“What are you planning with those special treats? Are you already trying to cheat?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, nobody. If you’re so worried, then I suggest you get moving. It’s like you said: you never know when a trap could be around the corner.”

Chiaki turned; Junko already vanished into the digital abyss. The goading annoyed her, but she’d have to act now and mourn later.

The gamer started the long walk to the central island, and journey around the circular path until the bridge to the next island laid before her. Sonia stood in front of the bridge; her demeanor suggested she felt worried. “Is something wrong, Sonia?”

“Oh, Nanami, it’s just… I really don’t know if proceeding any further is wise. Every time we’ve gotten through another of these horrible class trials… another island full of ways to kill each other awaits…”

“Yeah… I’m not excited about exploring another island either. But that’s why we must be careful
and be on the lookout for any tricks, I think.”

“I must say, I gravely fear the identity of this Future Foundation. What could their ulterior motives be for all this? Is it for a grand scheme of some kind, or perhaps the mastermind is a raging psychopath like the kind you see in slasher films…?”

“Hehe,” silently laughed Junko, still not visible but audible enough for Chiaki to here. “Looks the ditz does have a brain in that empty head, eh?”

“Go away!”

“Huh?” said a confused Sonia.

“I mean…yeah, that could be true. But you were never the type of person to let something like that scare you. We need to help keep everyone together so no one dies anymore. Just pretend you’re like that detective in that murder-mystery novel you like and track down the bad guys.”

Sonia expression was a mix of joy and surprise. “Wow, Nanami, you’re so aloof at times, I didn’t know you were capable of such…warmth.”

*I might’ve overdone it…* thought Chiaki. Talking to her royal friend again made her real persona seep out. Honestly, besides Hajime and Chisa, she might’ve been the closest with the Ultimate Princess. She vividly recalled the days they’d go shopping, and Chiaki would show Sonia horror games which she loved. Even the perfume she wore was the same from back then.

Sonia pumped her fists. “You’re right! Come, let us explore the unknown just like the pioneers did!” Before Chiaki could ask what that meant, Sonia grabbed her hand and pulled her along as they sprinted across the bridge.

After a while of this, the next island came clearer into view until the duo finally stopped, a surprising sight in front of them. In total contrast to the gloomy tone of this killing game, Chiaki gasped because a vibrant amusement park was on this island. And unlike the abandoned one where she met Izuru—this one was much bigger and fresher. *An amusement park? What could Junko have planned here?*

“How marvelous!” yelled Sonia. “It reminds of that magical place with the mouse I’ve heard tales
“Isn’t it horrible…?” said Monomi, appearing before. “That bully Monokuma does whatever he wants, even turning my home into this!”

“Yeah, he needs to be stopped.” Chiaki’s eyes widened when she realized the opportunity that presented itself. Monomi and her were alone; she could discuss some private matters with her. “Monomi…do you know who I really am…?”

Monomi tilted her head, her tears vanishing as if they never existed, before smiling. She put a paw up to her mouth before murmuring, “Of course, silly! We’re both agents of the Future Foundation and sisters made to help those with despair become filled with hope again.”

*She seems to still recognize me as the A.I and not the real Chiaki Nanami.* “There something I should tell you, Monomi…”

Monomi waved her hands frantically. “No, my dear! We can discuss our plans later, but it’s too risky out in the open. As it stands, if the other’s find out you’re in the Future Foundation, who knows what they’ll try? We’ll talk tonight after your investigation.”

“Okay, but just know…I know who’s behind this, and I know a way to stop them…!”

“So, you’ve figured out something. Hehe, I knew I could count on you, sis!”

“Hey, Nanami!” yelled Hajime, coming from a distance away.

“We’ll talk later! Love, love!” Just like that, Monomi vanished.
“So, here you were,” said Hajime, panting a bit. “I’ve looked as hard as I can but haven’t found anything so far. You discover anything on your end?”

“That’s…” Now that he was so close, the nostalgia began to overtake the gamer. The Hajime she spent nearly every day with back then stood in front of her. Only now, he wore a casual expression on his face instead of the pained one she always noticed back then. It might’ve had something to do with Hajime not realizing he didn’t have a talent. But still…having him this close took her breath away momentarily.

Hajime seemed confused. “Hmm? You okay, Nanami?”

“Sorry, I’m still feeling kinda sleepy. No, I didn’t find anything suspicious.”

“All I’ve managed to find so far is a castle, an out of maintenance rollercoaster, some bizarre train, and apparently Nekomaru has a clock in him too…” Hajime said, sighing. “I’m starting to think Monokuma made all that stuff up.”

“Maybe there’s a hidden area around here, like a secret dungeon. The special treats could be in one of the attractions.”

“Monokuma did mention something about a Funhouse. He said everyone needed to gather together for it to work. I went searching for everybody to see what you guys wanted to do.”

Chiaki realized this was an opportunity. “I’ll help you search, Hinata.”

The Reserve Course student grinned as the duo set out on their walk to look for the remaining survivors. Of course, Chiaki couldn’t stay focused on that. While the Hajime next to her wasn’t the same version she spent time with, it still was the same guy. For so long, she wanted to know why he took the actions he did, and what she failed at in making him feel adequate. She wanted to know who he really was. Should I risk asking the wrong questions…? Maybe I—

“Uh, Nanami?” said Hajime.

Chiaki realized she’d been in such deep thought, his class for her went through one ear and out the other. “Oh…sorry.”
“Heh, you’re always spacing out like that. I asked you what you thought about this whole Future Foundation thing… Who do you think is the traitor?”

Chiaki thought carefully about how to answer. “Well, I don’t know what this organization is and… I don’t want to think anyone here is a traitor… It’s probably more of Monokuma’s tricks.”

Hajime put a finger to his chin. “I was starting to lean that way too…but those ruins were too suspicious. Whether they are what Monokuma says is one thing, but I do believe this Future Foundation played a role in this. Though, I don’t know what…”

The pure irony of the situation made it hard for Chiaki to answer. How would he react knowing his other self, Izuru Kamakura, was a huge part in this? “Hinata…how do you feel about not remembering your talent…?”

Once Hajime eyed her with surprise, Chiaki wished she’d bit her tongue. She was talking too much, asking too many personal questions…but the desire to understand Hajime made her lose control.

“Well…I guess it’s not that big of a deal. If anything, I just wish I knew why I’m the only one I can’t remember. I mean, I’m with a bunch of Ultimates and I went to Hope’s Peak Academy, so I must have a talent of some kind. Also, you don’t suspect me for not having one, right?”

“Never.” Chiaki narrowed her eyes. “But…let’s just say you didn’t have one. How would you feel?”

Hajime developed a far-off look, and finally, Chiaki could see a glimpse of that constant anguish she saw from him during school. “…If I didn’t have one? Then…I don’t really know. All this time, was I just Hajime Hinata—a regular kid with no talent at all? I always idolized Hope’s Peak Academy, so to find out I wasn’t one—”

Hajime scrunched up his face as if he ate something terrible. “What’s wrong?” asked Chiaki.

“…Sometimes, when I’m sleeping, I get the strangest dream. I’m sitting alone while everybody surrounds me. They’re all laughing and berating me while I sit there frozen. And then…this shadow consumes me. The shadow feels terrifying…but strangely familiar—like I know what it is.” Hajime sighed, rubbing the back of his head. “I know this sounds strange.”
“No, I’ve seen a thing or two…”

Hajime balled his fists. “Damn it, just who the hell am I…?”

Chiaki put her hand around the straps of her backpack, debating on whether to say what she wanted. But, to rally everyone against Junko, she’d have to push the envelope a bit eventually.

“I don’t see why having a talent matters. Look at all the good you’ve done so far in this killing game even when you don’t know what it is. Having a talent doesn’t mean anything; you’re free to explore anything you want unlike me who’s only good for one thing. So, if you don’t have one, the normal Hinata is the best one anyway.” Chiaki smiled faded as she gazed at the ground, unable to meet Hajime’s surprised expression any longer. “At least, I believe so.”

The silence continued longer until Hajime said, “Yeah, you’re right, Nanami. Worrying about that now is meaningless. We gotta stay focused on finding the truth, and whatever the truth is—we’ll face it when the time comes.”

Chiaki faced him, her hand to her chest with a smile. “Yeah, we can do as long as everyone sticks together.”

“The last thing I need is to get too obsessed over talent and end up all crazed like Komaeda… I’ll pass on that.”

The gamer dreaded the day when he found out he did something extremely drastic in his desire for talent. Her attention then focused on the rest of the group who stood in front of the rollercoaster. “Looks like everyone’s there,” she said.

“Let’s go check it out.”

Everyone but Chiaki and Hajime had already gathered, in the midst of an argument. Once he noticed them, Fuyuhiko said, “You two finally showed up. Apparently, Monokuma is gonna give us a special prize if everyone rides this damn coaster.”

“And there’s no way in hell I’m doing that!” pleaded Kazuichi. “I get carsick like crazy!”
“Ahem!” said Monokuma. “Now that everyone’s present, let me present you all this park’s main attraction, the Great Ultra-Delicious Coaster!”

She’s bad at names…thought Chiaki. The gamer considered this could be a trap, but figured an exploding rollercoaster killing them all wouldn’t be any fun for Junko.

Hajime looked hesitant. “What’s the prize for riding this thing…?”

“If I told you that it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it? If you wanna know, you all just have to ride!”

Akane beamed from ear to ear. “Ah, yeah! I love thrill rides!”

“Have you gone insane!” yelled Kazuichi. “There’s absolutely no way we can ride that thing!”

“The prize could be those ship parts or that other stuff, though,” said Fuyuhiko.

“Just to be clear,” said Sonia, gazing at the rollercoaster like it was a precious antique, “where does this…rollercoaster device lead us?”

“Rollercoasters aren’t for travel,” said Chiaki. She’d ridden one once in real life. The trip was with her class, so that explains why Sonia doesn’t know. “It’s gonna go in a circle really fast and bring us back.”

Gundham snickered. “Have you never been to an amusement park, fiend? I’ve journeyed there once during my early days, and it was filled with man-eating demons!”

Just like at Hope’s Peak, Gundham’s wild exaggerations made Sonia starry-eyed since she took everything at face value. “Oh, I didn’t know such a wonder existed outside my country. Please allow me to accompany next time!”

“I entrance fee is the blood of a virgin; I shall offer you as tribute!”
Sonia’s expression dimmed. “I guess I cannot traverse there…”

“Wait,” said Kazuichi, stunned, “does that mean Miss Sonia…”

“Guys,” said Nagito putting his hands up, “banter between Ultimates is amazing, but we really need to speed this along so can everyone get on the ride.”

Kazuichi shook his head fiercely. “There’s just no way, damn it. I could die!”

Sighing, Nagito said, “Nidai, do you mind—”

“On it!” the team manager yelled as he grasped Kazuichi and strapped him down in the seat while the mechanic cried and pleaded for him to top. The gamer couldn’t help but laugh since this silly tone reminded her of the past.

Once everyone sat down and firmly strapped themselves in, Monokuma yelled, “All aboard!” before flipping the switch, forcing the rollercoaster to take off at maximum speed.

Everyone had their own adverse reactions, some louder than others. Chiaki simply sat back and enjoyed the force of the wind making her hair go wild like a ship’s sails during a typhoon. While Junko giving them an opportunity to have fun like this was suspicious, Chiaki became too absorbed in the smiles and excited shouts of her friend to think about it. In these moments, her peaceful days at Hope’s Peak academy felt like a reality once again.

Finally, the rollercoaster slowed until it came to a standstill at its original position. One by one, everyone but Chiaki staggered of the rollercoaster, trying to gather their bearings after the wild ride full of velocity.

“Okay,” said Hajime, breathing hard, “that was a little too intense…”

“Yeah…” murmured Chiaki, still sitting on the coaster with her back turned to everyone.
“The ride wasn’t too much for you, was it? If you’re feeling sick, we can walk to the—”

Chiaki waved him off. “No, I’ll be fine in a moment.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

The reason Chiaki didn’t want anyone witnessing her was because she wouldn’t pass for the stoic A.I. right now. With the rush of having fun with everyone, she accidentally immersed herself too much in this digital world. Against her will, tears started pouring down her face. Then, the next thing she knew, light laughter erupted from her lips.

She was amid an important battle against Junko Enoshima, but for right now at least, she allowed the emotions she’d kept bottled up and lost herself in this illusion as the laughter and tears continued.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes

Guess what time it is… That’s right!

Random Skit #13: Entertainment

Chisa sat by her bedside, observing Izuru at her window before and idea came to her. “I know what’ll give you excitement. How about a good joke!”

“Humor doesn’t have any—”

“Knock, knock!”

“… Who’s there?”

“Ya.”

“Ya who?”

“Yahoo, I’m excited too!” Chisa laughed at her brilliant joke but Izuru didn’t budge. “Okay, how about this. Why did the Izuru Kamakura cross the road?”

“Why…?”

“To see if anything interesting was on the other side.” Once again, Chisa laughed at her own joke. She turned to see Izuru’s reaction, but he already left. “Tch, tough crowd.”
“Let’s play a game!” said Aoi, speaking with Chiaki. “I’ll name a division leader and you give me a word that best sums them up. Let’s start with, Kirigiri.”

“Focused.”

“Great Gozu.”

“Muscles”

“Izayoi.”

“Sharp.”

“Ando.”

“Bitter.”

“Gekkogahara.”

“Warm.”

“Sakakura.”

“Aggressive.”

“Yukizome.”

“Difficult.”

“Kimura.”

“Kind.”

“Kizakura.”

“Calm.”

“Munakata.”

“Stern.”

“Tengan.”

“Old.”

“Chiaki Nanami.”

“… Undecided.”
“Alright!” yelled Akane, pumping her fists. “Let’s go another round!”

“No freaking way!” Kazuichi responded, his face buried in a nearby trashcan.

After Chiaki composed herself, she joined the others in the joyous reprieve from this grim game. But she refocused and faced Monokuma before she said, “Where’s our prize for riding?”

“Right down to business, huh? Okay, your treat is this file!” The monotone bear pulled out a gray folder filled to the brim with papers.

Chiaki gulped because she recognized the symbol etched on the front. Without question, this was the symbol of the Future Foundation. For a moment, it seemed like Monokuma smirked, likely Junko getting a kick out of the gamer’s worry.

“That symbol!” said Hajime. “It’s just like the one from those ruins. This is a file from the Future Foundation!” That drew everyone’s attention as they gathered around.

Nagito stared at the folder intently. “… Is it okay if we look inside?” Monokuma nodded as Nagito took the file, and everyone didn’t blink as he opened the contents.

Nagito read out loud while everyone listened, but Chiaki knew what the pages were about instantly. The file contained information about the mutual killing game Junko held for the seventy-eight class, filled with information about the students, the nature of the game, and contained photographs of those involved. The gamer recalled having a file like this delivered to her one day. It was a confidential report of the killing game.

“What the…” murmured Nagito. “Why is he here…?” Nagito pointed to a picture of Byakuya, not the imposter, but the genuine Affluent Progeny that worked under Kirigiri in the Future Foundation.

“Th-this…is Togami…!” stammered Gundham.
Hajime eyes widened. “Yeah, this is definitely him…albeit much skinner—but the file says he’s the Ultimate Affluent Progeny just like our Togami was… What the hell…?”

Nekomaru rubbed his mechanical head. “Hey, and what’s all this about a killing school trip…?”

“The way it’s laid out here,” said Sonia, “it seems a killing game like this one was conducted inside Hope’s Peak Academy with Ultimates just like us.”

“Hold up,” said Fuyuhiko, “so these fucked up killings happened inside the school?”

Akane tapped her foot against the ground. “So, what if those World Ender guys, like…held a bunch of these killing games across the world before this…? Damn, if only Togami hadn’t croaked before since he coulda said something.”

Kazuichi, still grasping his stomach said, “But he had his memories wiped like ours too, right? Maybe he couldn’t remember…unless he was playing us the whole time…”

While they all bantered back and forth, bouncing theories and speculation around, Chiaki noticed Junko redacted a lot of things in the file. If she left out information, Junko didn’t want them knowing everything. Regardless, Chiaki couldn’t add anything meaningful to the conversation because she had to keep up appearances. The gamer didn’t know why Junko would even bother showing them this unless it was a test to see if she’d break and start telling everyone the truth.

“Speculate as you might,” said Monokuma, “you’ll never truly know since it’s all in the memories of your school life the Future Foundations stole from you.”

Nagito clenched his fists, his face contorted in anger. “Even so, it’s unforgivable how these people just trample on hope as they please! They should all be destroyed!”

Kazuichi rubbed his head wildly. “Ah, just screw all this crap! Just tell me where those ship parts you promised are so I can sail back home!”

“Upupu, who knows? Should be somewhere on this island.”
“No,” murmured Hajime, “we still have the Funhouse left…”

“Bingo! All the treats you guys want is somewhere in the Funhouse. I can take you there, but only if everybody is willing to go.”

The alert that rang whenever Chiaki had one of her bad premonitions went off like a fire alarm. This is what Junko aimed for; she wanted them all int that Funhouse. Perhaps, those treats did exist there, but the bad would heavily outweigh the good. The problem was, Chiaki didn’t know how to deter everyone from going.

“Everyone…let’s do it…” Hajime was hesitant at first, but then his posture became more confident. “Let’s go to this Funhouse and find the truth!”

“Is that alright?” asked Sonia. “That building looks very ominous…and not in the fascinating kind of way.”

“We don’t have a choice. If we don’t check things out, Monokuma we’ll never let us progress beyond this point. Our way off this island and the answers we’ve been looking for could be there. It could be a trap, but…really, weren’t we already trapped here in the first place?”

Nagito smiled. “…And, it could be the only opportunity Hinata has to know his talent, *if* he has one.” Hajime looked away. “Regardless, I’m in agreement. Following Monokuma’s whims is unfortunate, but this is all we can do now.”

Monokuma giggled. “Looks like we’re all in agreement. If there are no objections…”

Monokuma glanced at everyone, specifically Chiaki. Junko was begging her to say something in objection. Chiaki wished she knew what to say to discourage everyone without leaving room for someone to question her, but she couldn’t do it in the scope of a few seconds. So, reluctantly, she kept quiet.

“Puhuhu, looks like it’s on to the Funhouse! I’m off to get everything ready, so I’ll go ahead!” Monokuma vanished in a fit of laughter.

Chiaki grimaced. “I’m really not on board with this idea, but if everyone wants to…I guess there’s not much of a choice.”
“Fuhaha, plunging ourselves into a trap!” yelled Gundham. “How truly fascinating this will be!”

Sonia nodded, looking reluctant herself. “Then, let’s make our way there.”

The group set off for the train that’d lead them to the Funhouse. Chiaki followed behind the group, gazing at the brick path. As this went on, she realized how hard this game really was. Going against Junko wasn’t easy, but with her actions so restricted, the task proved even harder. Her chances would’ve been better if she’d been in at the beginning of the game, but everything already devolved into such madness making it incredibly hard.

This game is difficult because Junko keeps forcing me to play at her pace…but how can I shift it to mine instead…? Her only opportunity laid in the answer to that question. But now she’d have to focus her attention on whatever danger lurked in the Funhouse.

Once the group arrived at the train, the machine roared with life while Monokuma stood by in a Conductor’s costume. “No need for caution; it won’t fly off or anything.”

“I’m starting to feel bad about this…” said Kazuichi.

Fuyuhiko took a seat on the train. “Tch, now you want to puss out? What happened to getting the hell off this island?”

“He’s right!” yelled Akane, taking her seat with gusto. “Let’s gooo!” Chiaki wished she shared the gymnast’s optimism. Of course, she probably wanted to ride the train so much, she didn’t consider it could be a trap.

Everyone boarded the train, Chiaki taking a seat next to Hajime. Once everyone was on, the train started moving slowly towards a dim tunnel. The gamer took a deep breath, almost expecting something weird to happen at this point.

“Sorry for making you do this,” murmured Hajime. “I know you have a bad feeling; I do too. But…I don’t know what else we could do.”

“There’s wasn’t anything else we could do. I hate games like this the most. No matter what you
do, it’s rigged against you from the beginning.”

“If only we knew more about the Future Foundation and their reasons for doing this. Understanding their motives would make it easier to avoid the tricks they use…”

Chiaki shouldn’t have, but since Hajime was the only one who could hear her, she said, “… What if we’ve misunderstood something?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if…the Future Foundation isn’t the enemy Monokuma made them out to be…?”

Just as Hajime expressed intrigue in her claim, the weirdness the gamer expected happened. Smoke began to bellow from the shadows, consuming the train and then the group until visibility failed her. Several of her classmates screamed or yelled to cover their mouths, but Chiaki’s eyes became heavy. Then, against her will, consciousness left her as everything became black. Once again, Junko had caught her in a trap.

VVV

The gamer awoke to voices around her, rubbing her eyes to cure the blurry vision. It’d be an understatement to say she was in a slightly different place from before. The scenery changed completely from the dim tunnel. Around her, bright red walls coated from top to bottom in strawberries formed the environment. The room contained some items you’d see at a small park, featuring playground items that also had the strawberry insignias coated on them.

Bewildered, the gamer rose to join the others who already talked among themselves. “What happened?” asked Chiaki.

“A trap is what happened,” said Fuyuhiko, annoyance in his voice. “That damn Monokuma set off that smoke, then knocked us out and put us…wherever the hell this is.”

Nagito put a finger to his chin. “I don’t think there’s any doubt where we are. This is the Funhouse.”
“Exactly!” yelled Monokuma, appearing. “Welcome to Strawberry House!”

“Strawberry House?” asked Sonia. “This is the Funhouse, is it not?”

“It’s a part of it.” Monokuma pulled out a piece of paper with a description of the Strawberry House layout on it. “You’re currently at the indoor park on the third floor; the second floor has a lounge complete with guestrooms divided by deluxe, standard, and crummy class; and the first floor of Strawberry House is the Final Dead Room which had a hallway that leads to Strawberry Tower! That concludes the tour. Any questions?”

Kazuichi spoke for everyone when he yelled, “Hell yeah we have questions!”

“To haul us to a lair such as this,” said Gundham, “what is the purpose?”

“Well, it’s an escape game of course!”

*Escape game?* Chiaki was more than familiar with the genre after playing games like that one with the masked men. But she didn’t have a clue what Junko aimed for here. “If this is an escape game, then there must be a way out,” she said.

Monokuma laughed ominously. “I’ll tell you how to escape right now. It’s easy…I’ll release you all when the next killing happens! Have fun!” The bear disappeared, leaving the group in stunned silence.

“What the fuck!” yelled Fuyuhiko. “We have to kill someone to leave!”

*No, no, no no…! This isn’t right…!* Chiaki’s mind raced like a car on a motorway. This didn’t fit. Junko Enoshima couldn’t find any fun in something like this. This incredibly straightforward way to force a murder didn’t fit the blonde mastermind at all. Where was the fun in pressing their hands to the fire like this? Junko didn’t plant the seeds of despair and wait for someone to act; she outright made it so that if they didn’t, they’d never get out. This method was no more elaborate than locking them in a room with a knife and yelling “go!”

Nagito rubbed his forehead. “It was an obvious trap…but I didn’t think Monokuma would be this forward about getting to the next trial.”
“This is screwed up…” said Hajime. “We don’t even have a choice?”

Nekomaru huffed. “Damn, if only I didn’t let my guard down and fall asleep.”

“How does a robot fall asleep!” yelled Kazuichi. “You’re fully autonomous now, so the gas shouldn’t have affected you!”

Nekomaru turned, pointing to a button at the back of his neck. “Someone must have hit this button and forced all my functions into sleep mode. I’m completely powerless after that.”

“What the hell is the point of a function like that…?” asked Hajime.

An easy way to murder… Chiaki shook her head, refusing to let Junko have her way like this. “For now, why don’t we look for some kind of exit.”

“Is there another exit?” questioned Nagito. “I doubt Monokuma would leave a way out because that’d ruin the motive he set up.”

Fuyuhiko interjected in Chiaki’s stead. “What are you giving up for, dumbass! If there was a way in, then there should be one out too.”

Nagito looked starstruck. “Ah, hearts that refuse to give in until the end… This is hope! Yes, let’s explore and look for a way out of here!”

“Exploring on our own is dangerous,” said Chiaki. “We should form teams.”

Immediately, Fuyuhiko said, “Owari, you come with me.” The yakuza rolled his eyes when he received strange looks. “It’s not what you guys think. I just need to talk with her about something. You okay with that, Owari?”

“Whatever, I don’t mind.” Akane had been silent since Chiaki woke up in the Funhouse, a rare phenomenon. She seemed lower on energy than usual, something unthinkable for the
accomplished gymnast. “If we’re gonna go, let’s get a move on already.” With that, the strange looking duo of Akane and Fuyuhiko departed down the stairs.

Kazuichi sported a cheeky grin. “Miss Sonia, I guess we should also…”

“She left with Tanaka already,” said Nekomaru.

“What!” yelled Kazuichi, sulking.

“I think I’ll get going too,” said Nagito, turning to Chiaki with a friendly smile. “Nanami, would you like to come with me?”

“Me…?” Up to this point, she and the lucky student hadn’t had much interaction in this game from the clips she saw. Unless… he grew suspicious of her.

“Well, we hadn’t talked much before this, so I figured it’d be a good chance to if you don’t mind.”

Kazuichi snapped out of his sulking and said, “Hey… mind if I tag along with you two?”

Nagito laughed. “You’re willing to do that much to avoid Hinata, huh?”

“What?” asked Hajime. “Why would he… Don’t tell me you still think I’m the traitor!”

Kazuichi rubbed the back of his head. “It’s just, you know, man…the truth is you’re the one we know less about because of the missing talent thing…”

Hajime furrowed his brow. “I’ve been here the whole time helping you! How could you still be so suspicious of me!”

“That doesn’t mean anything! The real you could be something different… just like Tsumiki was! And you were the main one who wanted to come to the Funhouse!”
“W-What… You think I wanted this to happen…?”

Chiaki looked down, wanting to defend Hajime. The best she could say was he wasn’t the traitor for sure, but the gamer couldn’t risk suspicion falling on her right now. However, the irony of Hajime’s other self being one of the main components to initiating this game did mean he technically did have something to do with this. Still, Hajime Hinata didn’t do any of it.

“Sorry, Hinata…” murmured Kazuichi. “I want to believe you, but I don’t know. That’s why I’m going with Nanami. It’s not like I want to go with Komaeda either.”

Nagito put his hands up, trying to diffuse the situation. “Okay, it is what it is. Just come along with us if you’re that worried, Soda. Better to investigate with a mind free of paranoia.”

Chiaki still wanted to interject on Hajime’s behalf. “Ah, then I’ll just go with—”

“It’s fine, Nanami,” interjected Hajime. “Just go on ahead.”

He had the look again, the same expression of anguish from back then. *Sorry, Hinata; I promise it’ll be better,* thought Chiaki, the sensation of failing him again bothering her. “…Got it. See you later.”

Chiaki reluctantly set off with the Nagito and Kazuichi, descending the stairs and exploring the second floor first. Only three things of note laid on this floor: the telephone that didn’t operate, the guest rooms ordered by how luxurious they were, and the out of place photo of Hope Peak Academy’s founder hanging in the lounge. Why would Junko have a picture of the original Izuru Kamakura’s hanging up in the Funhouse? Who knows? Nonetheless, the group didn’t spend too long on the floor since Gundham and Sonia already had the lounge and Fuyuhiko and Akane had the guestrooms.

So, Chiaki’s group settled on exploring whatever mysteries waited on the first floor. They only made small talk up until now, but Chiaki decided to address something on her mind. “You shouldn’t accuse Hinata like that, Soda,” said Chiaki looking ahead with a stoic expression. “Right now, we need to unite against Monokuma, not doubt each other.”

Kazuichi adjusted his cap to scratch his head. “Yeah, yeah, I know it’s kinda screwed up, but the fact is he’s the only one that doesn’t know his talent. Either he got special treatment, or he’s not telling us everything. What the hell am I supposed to think about something strange like that?”
“You’re supposed to have trust in your friends. Think of it like when someone leaves their machine or tech with you to fix. They may not know you, but they trust you still to help. You should do the same for Hinata, I think.”

Kazuichi put his head down, grumbling while Nagito clapped. “Such inspiring words! What else to be expected from a symbol of hope!”

Chiaki sighed. “You played a role in this too, Komaeda. This suspicion around Hinata didn’t start until you brought it up this morning.”

“Aw, it was all in good fun. Besides, if we are to believe what Monokuma said, there is a traitor in our midst somewhere. It’s only natural to look towards those with the oddest circumstances, don’t you think?”

“If that’s so, then you be the main culprit. Since this game started, you’ve done as you please even if it puts others in danger.”

“Oh, so then you must think I’m the traitor, right?”

“No, your actions haven’t been helpful, but I don’t think you’re lying about your intentions at all… As strange as they are.”

Nagito chuckled before staring at her intently. “That brings me to what I wanted to discuss with you. I’m interested in knowing who you think the traitor is, Nanami.”

I need to be careful, she thought. “I don’t think who the traitor is matters.”

“Really…? You don’t think somebody working against the group behind the scenes is a problem?”

“It’s just…Monokuma said there was a traitor among us. I’m don’t know if there is one or not, but if there is…how do we know they mean harm. I mean…the word “traitor” could mean a lot of things. I think we rushed to assume that it meant something bad because of the title and the way it was told to us.”
Nagito put a finger to his chin, his eyes searching the ground. “… Hmm, so what you’re suggesting is that we’ve misunderstood what the Future Foundation is then? But if that’s the case, then who are the ones to fault here? The fact is someone put us in here for nefarious purposes, but who if not the Future Foundation…?”

How could she answer that complicated question? Chiaki’s tenure with the Future Foundation showed her the organization wasn’t full of saints, but they weren’t to blame in full. The culprits were the artificial intelligence version of Junko Enoshima, Chisa, Izuru, and her despair converted class. Obviously, none of her classmates would believe they were the ones who wanted this. Who in the Neo World Program with her would believe the incredulous series of events that led to this mess?

“Man,” said Kazuichi, “I don’t have a clue what you two are talking about…”

“No, it’s fine,” said Nagito with a smile. “Thanks, Nanami. Because of the unique point you’ve provided, I’ve seen this whole thing from another angle. I knew confiding in one as sharp as yourself would give me a new perspective. Alas, I can only dream of the unique way the minds of Ultimate work…”

Chiaki cringed a bit; she never liked Nagito’s self-deprecating habit of putting Ultimates on a pedestal. “Talent isn’t the ultimate weapon you think. If anything, it makes things harder if it deals with something your talent has no use for.”

Nagito merely laughed that off. “Nanami, you underestimate the effect you have on those around you and society. It’s your job to shape the future, and a stepping stone like myself needs to know their place and support you every step of the way.” Nagito walked off, set to investigate whatever caught his eye. “Such is the balance of the world between the talented and the talentless.”

“Ugh,” said Kazuichi, “why is he such a freaking weirdo? One moment he’s all crazy, and the next he’s all smiles saying how great we are. I’d think he was the traitor if he wasn’t so in-your-face about how much of a freak he was.”

“As long as he helps us, it doesn’t matter. Let’s explore around; make sure to keep an eye out since Monokuma could’ve put traps in here somewhere.”

With that, the gamer explored the floor, the constant imagery of strawberries on everything beginning to annoy her. The first thing she found was a large door with Monokuma’s face on it.
The door had the words “Final Dead Room” on it. The gamer in Chiaki screamed at her right now; the door was exactly like something out of a dungeon crawler game.

“What’s this supposed to be?” said Chiaki, too timid to touch the door and find out.

“I’m glad you asked!” yelled Monokuma on cue. “Only those who triumph over the life-threatening game behind these doors will be able to reach the Octagon...the fabled holy land where the Ultimate Weapon awaits. If you’re feeling heroic and willing to risk your life to continue living, then take the challenge. Surely, the Ultimate Gamer is chomping at the bit to tackle this task!"

If it were almost any other situation, Chiaki would jump at this challenge. She’d played so many of those types of dungeon-crawlers that she remembered over a hundred maps and tricks by heart. In many ways, her talent catered well to this opportunity. However, this wasn’t just any dungeon. Junko Enoshima prepared this dungeon, a boss more ruthless than anyone. And Chiaki knew from experience that challenging dungeons made by Junko didn’t end the best even if you were skilled. So, knowing that, Chiaki knew what she had to do.

“I’m gonna pass,” said Chiaki. “Seriously, what’s with you and life-threatening dungeons...?”

Monokuma shrugged. “Maybe that’s something we finally have in common, hahahaha!” With those last mocking words, Monokuma vanished.

Despite her intuition telling her no, Chiaki couldn’t help but wonder what this Ultimate Weapon is. Perhaps the gamer in her welcomed the challenge. “Why would she put—”

“Chiaki?” said Hajime, appearing. She lost herself in thought so much, it’s like he just pulled a Monokuma with materializing out of thin air. “What happened?” Did Monokuma bother you or something?”

Clearly, Chiaki couldn’t say Junko was on her mind; she scrambled to think of something. “No, I was just wondering why pick strawberries?”

“Hmm, why do you wonder that?”

“Personally, I think tangerines would’ve been fine. Or apples and peaches.”
“Yeah, that would’ve been fine.”

“Then why strawberry…?”

“Who knows?”

“What a mystery…”

Hajime eyes shifted from side to side, an awkward silence ensuing, this conversation not having any clear direction or meaning at all. “Well…I’m going to look around more.”

*I’m so uncool…*thought Chiaki who wouldn’t be surprised at all if Hajime avoided her the rest of the day.

Ignoring her own discontent with her conversation skills, the gamer explored the rest of the first floor. The floor had a male and female bathroom; nothing seemed too suspicious in the female room, and Nekomaru confirmed he saw nothing strange in the male one. While he sulked over is ongoing constipation—Chiaki didn’t know robots could develop constipation—Chiaki examined the elevator on the far side of the room. An elevator existing suggested a new possibility with Strawberry House.

*The only area between here is the second and third floor which didn’t have an elevator… Does that mean there’s a basement for maybe something on the roof?* Next to the door was a button with grapes emblazoned on it like the phone in the lounge. Chiaki, careful to bolt and run if needed, pressed the button and…nothing happened. She’d think it was out of order if not for Junko; this elevator would come into play somehow.

The final place to search was Strawberry Hall, which would lead her to Strawberry Tower. The walk through the dark hallway put her on alert. The dimness contrasted the bright strawberry theme the rest of the house had. Another door awaited her at the end of this hallway; Strawberry Tower awaited on the other side. A button that said “open” rested on the side; once again, Chiaki readied herself and pressed the button. A wide room revealed itself along with two people who were already there.

“Ah,” you’ve joined us, Nanami!” heartily said Nekomaru. “Good timing; we were wondering what the door over there could be.” Nekomaru pointed to a door with green grapes on it, like the
“It’s odd,” said Hajime. “The map only goes this far for Strawberry House, yet there’s something beyond this door. Monokuma isn’t telling us everything…”

Chiaki racked her brains, unable to come up with any ideas other than to say, “Let’s go over this with everyone. We’ve searched everywhere on the map.”

Nekomaru and Hajime agreed as the trio left the Strawberry Tower. Luckily, everybody saved them the trouble of bringing them together. The group convened around Monokuma in front of the elevator. Chiaki, Hajime, and Nekomaru joined in as Monokuma went on about some irrelevant nonsense.

“So,” said Monokuma, noticing the trio joining the group, “did you all get a general idea of Strawberry House’s side?”

“Side?” questioned Nagito. “I assume you’re suggesting there’s more to the Funhouse?”

“Of course; why else would this contact elevator be here! It travels along a rail, so it can do more than just move vertically like normal ones. And because of that, it’s possible to travel to Grape House!”

“… Grape House?” questioned Chiaki, recalling the emblems of grape she’s spotted so far.

“Everything will become clear when we arrive there. I’ll be going ahead!”

Monokuma disappeared, leaving a hesitant group. Chiaki, a fact known by those close to her, didn’t like elevators at all—let alone one involving Junko—making this a huge turn off for her. Everyone didn’t seem fond of the idea either; however, as Hajime said—they are all trapped anyway. So, reluctantly, everyone entered the elevator. Once everyone was ready, Chiaki pressed the button which activated the elevator, or at least she thought it did.

“Are…are we moving?” asked Chiaki. The usual sensation of riding an elevator wasn’t present, as if they weren’t moving at all.
“Holy crap,” said Kazuichi, wide-eyed. “If that’s true, this is an amazing elevator. The fact there’s no vibration means this is really high-performance.”

Akane smiled. “Maybe we should open the door to make extra sure.”

“I highly advise against that!” yelled Sonia.

Chiaki put her trust in the mechanic. While the elevator having no vibrations calmed her nerves about riding in one, that meant they could be falling from thousands of feet and not even know. That fear dispelled once the doors opened, revealing a similar layout—except it was bright green with grapes everywhere.

“Welcome to Grape House!” welcomed Monokuma, waiting and ready for the group with another map in his paws. “Aside from no Final Dead Room, there’s virtually no difference between this house and Strawberry House. However, the attraction here is what lies on the third floor… The Monokuma Archive! If you’d like to know yours truly better and his accomplishments, give it a visit! Any questions?”

“Ugh,” moaned Akane. “So, where’s the food at? I’m starvin’ over here.”

“Upupu, you fool, the fact that you’re getting hungry is the time limit for this escape game!”

Chiaki closed her eyes, knowing that’d be the case the moment Monokuma said there wasn’t a way out. Still, it sent a collective gasp among everyone. In truth—Chiaki didn’t know how it worked—she hadn’t experienced hunger since coming in the Neo World Program. Perhaps it had something to with the different way she’s linked with the game, but she wasn’t sure. But, for her friends…

“What the hell are you saying…?” murmured Fuyuhiko.

Monokuma laughed even louder. “To put it simply, if no one kills, you’ll starve to death! If you’re going to do it, then make it snappy… Murder tends to be hard when you have no energy, ahahahaha!” Monokuma left, leaving the group in bewilderment.

“Damn him!” yelled Fuyuhiko.
“Crap…” said Kazuichi pulling his hat over his face. “Why do we gotta deal with this crap!”

Akane looked as if she had an internal crisis. “Was he bein’ serious…? That’s the one thing I can’t deal with! I don’t care if I starve; just let me eat first!”

Nekomaru yelled, “Stay calm you all! Panicking in this situation will only cloud your better judgment!”

“Well then,” said Nagito, oddly calm, “I suggest we get to investigating again with how dire the situation is. The same teams from before should work, right?”

“Hold it!” yelled Kazuichi, confidence brimming on his face out of nowhere. “I want to team with Miss Sonia this—”

“She’s gone, dude,” said Fuyuhiko.

Chiaki, too used to this happening to the mechanic in real life, said, “… I think you’re being avoided, Soda.”

With that, everyone tried to regain their composure, their time feeling much more precious and shorter. Everyone agreed to meet in Grape Tower after they concluded their search before setting off.

Before that, though, Chiaki noticed a bronze statue. The statue was completely out of place since it didn’t adorn the grape theme, but more importantly, she recognized who it represented. The nameplate saying “Ogre” confirmed it. The pure strength the statue emanated felt like the woman it depicted rested beneath the bronze surface, hopefully, ready to bust out and throw Junko in a volcano.

“Sakura Ogami…” murmured Chiaki, remembering the martial artist and dear friend of Aoi from the killing game. She peered over her shoulder; once no one gazed at her direction, she bowed in front of the statue before beginning her investigation of Grape House.

_I need to solve the mystery of this place!_ thought Chiaki, passionate to stop Junko while wearing the stone face of A.I. Chiaki Nanami.
“Hold it!” said Chiaki putting out her hand to emphasize urgency. She’d broken away from the group with Nagito and Kazuichi for obvious reasons and tailed Hajime and Nekomaru. Overhearing how Nekomaru and Hajime described the layout of the Funhouse, she stepped in, wishing to announce her own theory on this facility. “It’s pointless to break down the door, I think.”

“Hold on,” said Hajime, surprised, “why aren’t you with Komaeda and Soda?”

Chiaki loved all her classmates, but couldn’t lie. “…Those two are exhausting to hang around for too long.” Both Hajime and Nekomaru nodded, fully understanding her plight. “That door won’t lead outside… Definitely not.”

“That’s rare for you to say,” said Nekomaru.

“I’ve thought about hard, and I think I know what the secret of this place is.” Both looked confused. Chiaki understood since the reason she figured it out is her experience with mapping out things in her head. She’d taken careful notice of the layout of both houses and kept in mind the challenge is to escape. To make such a game work, one needs an elaborate area. And if what Monokuma said is true that death is the only escape…then Chiaki, to her dismay, pieced together the true nature of the Funhouse. The truth wouldn’t be fun to explain, like always.

“…You have to pay close attention to the relationship of each house to its towers. In Strawberry House, the elevator on the first floor is on the left-hand side, right? And in Grape House it’s on the right side and that hall leads to Grape Tower. Knowing that…it means the two buildings—”

“See,” yelled an annoyed Kazuichi with Nagito walking by his side, “I told you she’d be here!” Hajime seemed like he wanted to interject before Kazuichi said, “Thanks to that, you left me alone with Komaeda… I don’t want to be alone with this guy!”

Nagito glanced down. “So…you don’t trust me or Hinata, huh? Why have you decided to stop trusting humans…?”

“Well…well you’re the one who made me!”
Chiaki ignored Kazuichi’s usual bickering, noticing the entire group entering Grape Tower. “Oh, you all finished up investigating?”

“Wasn’t that much to search,” said Fuyuhiko. “We couldn’t find a single fuckin’ clue…”

Akane hugged her shoulders, eyes desperate like a withdrawal victim. “There’s seriously no food anywhere! This ain’t funny at all!”

“Well…” murmured Kazuichi, eyeing Gundam’s hamsters. Chiaki nearly stopped him, guessing what he’d suggest and what the reaction would be. But the mechanic had to learn these lessons himself as he did in the real world. “The hamsters Tanaka carried technically are…”

“You imbecile!” yelled Sonia in a voice really commanding for someone her size. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“Ah, sorry!” Kazuichi backed away, paralyzed in fear and apologizing profusely.

“But,” said Chiaki, getting everyone on track again, “will the hamsters survive without food?”

Gundham crossed his arms. “Fortunately, fate would have it that the flowers in Strawberry’s garden bloomed from hell’s garden itself. The seeds shall be enough to sustain every hit point of the Dark Devas!” Gundham took the well-being of his animals very seriously. The hamsters starving would’ve been a good motive to help tip him over the edge. That card off the table relieved Chiaki.

“With that weight off our back,” said Nagito, “I’ll explain what I found. On the third floor was the Monokuma archive; as he said, it’s literally an archive full of stuff about Monokuma. It’s like a celebrity with a shrine dedicated to themselves.”

Figures, thought Chiaki, never surprised by Junko’s endless narcissism. “Looks like we never need to go there,” she said. “Ever.”

“Thing is…I came across a lost child…” Everyone expressed bewilderment before Nagito yelled for this “child” to come out of hiding.
Finally, the child revealed herself. “H-hello…” murmured Monomi.

“Ah,” said Fuyuhiko. “I don’t know what I was expecting…”

“See! I knew you’d all react like that! But it’s fine… I’m used to the endless bullying. How sad is it that I’ve gotten used to it…?”

“Did…Monokuma drag you here too?” asked Sonia.

Monomi’s tears started to fly. “Yes…I’m so ashamed to get tricked by him. I’m such a failure as a teacher!”

“Hey…” said Akane, eyeing Monomi the same way Kazuichi eyed Gundam’s hamsters. “Are you a complete stuffed animal? There’s gotta be some real meat in there, right?”

“I’m gonna be food!” yelled Monomi, running behind Chiaki for refuge.

“Anyhow,” said Sonia, “we made a promising discovery!”

Gundham chuckled, smirking. “I’ve found something impressive indeed. Perhaps you all remember Monokuma’s promise of ship parts in this wretched place?”

For the first time, Kazuichi gazed at Gundham with awe. “A-are you saying what I think…?”

“Haha, fall to your knees and show gratitude to me! Behold, I’ve discovered a motor to a ship!”

Chiaki wasn’t an expert on engineering ships, but even she could tell the little radio-controlled toy in Gundham’s hand wasn’t an engine to a ship. Everyone besides Sonia shared her opinion as their excitement vanished.

Kazuichi rubbed his face. “You mean to tell me the part you found was just some stupid toy!”
“Hahaha!” laughed Monokuma, appearing. “I never said a single thing about an actual ship being real, dumbass!”

Chiaki knew that much already. In this world, only the Neo World Program existed. If someone sailed out in the sea, they’d hit an invisible wall or fall into an endless pit of code. No one in the group spoke up in an angry way since they probably expected this to happen. But having a strand of hope plucked like that stung for them. Junko was always great at demoralizing people with the simplest of acts.

“I’m sure you guys figured it out,” said Fuyuhiko, “but I’ll say it anyway. The second floor has guestrooms and a lounge just like Strawberry House. But the phone in there had a strawberry button instead of the grape one the other house had. This is a guess, but I think the two phones can communicate with each other.”

That supported Chiaki’s hypothesis on the Funhouse even more. “If that’s all, I’d really like to continue.”

Hajime’s eyes widened. “Right, you think you solved the structure of the Funhouse.”

The room focused on her, dying to know this important information. Chiaki hoped she didn’t mislead them since a mistake could jeopardize everything. But her confidence in her deduction was high; her skills on this would impress even Kyoko, probably.

“So, based on everything I’ve seen and heard… I’ve concluded that Grape Tower and Strawberry Tower are actually the same building.” Everyone looked intrigued, glancing around them, comparing how if you ignore the patterns—Grape Tower and Strawberry Tower was the same. She glanced at Monokuma; once she didn’t see the usual leer, her confidence rose.

Nagito put a finger to his chin, not meeting her eyes. “And what led you to that conclusion?”

“Their positions.” Chiaki pulled out the houses’ map to give her explanation visual support. “Inside Strawberry House, Strawberry Hall is on your left when your back is facing the elevator. But inside Grape House, the hall is on your right instead. If you put them together…the two towers are the same building and each house meets in the center.”

Hajime gasped. “Yeah... yeah, I think you’ve got it! If the theory about the telephones is true, then that could be true for the doors too. If there’s a grape image in Strawberry Tower and a strawberry
image in Grape Tower, that might be the indication of where they lead!”

Chiaki met Hajime’s smile. It’s like he read her mind and put her thoughts into words. “That means depending on which door we use to enter here, the tower changes to either grape or strawberry. That means the door has the picture of a grape on the opposite side.”

“Sounds good, but shouldn’t we confirm it first?” said Kazuichi. “If we can close the door from the other side…”

Chiaki saw through that as well. “That might be impossible. Hinata, when you and Nidia entered Grape Tower, didn’t it take some time before the door opened?”

Hajime paused before he said, “Yeah…it did actually. How did you know that?”

“Just as I assumed… When I was alone, I went back to Strawberry House since I felt there was more there. That’s when I noticed the Strawberry Hall door automatically closed. No matter how much I pressed the button, it never opened. That leads me to believe the doors to both towers can never open at the same time. If we could, it’d ruin the mystery of the Funhouse.”

Nagito smiled. “It all fits perfectly when you think about it. I believe you’ve discovered the secret of this place, Nanami.”

“Hold it,” said Akane. “I don’t get all this stuff Nanami is sayin’ and all, but the colors of the towers are different, y’know?”

“They’re just lights on the floor reflecting off a white wall,” said Nagito. “I thought it was weird but Nanami helped me make sense of that.”

Chiaki pointed to her feet. “If you look closely, the symbols aren’t actually on the floor. It’s a screen projecting from below it.”

“We need to test this,” said Nagito. “If we leave something here and enter from the other side, we’ll have our answer.”
“Want me to stay?” asked Akane.

“That won’t work,” said Nekomaru. “These walls have sensors all over them. My guess is their purpose is to detect any movement in the tower. It’s quite quality too… I doubt even a heartbeat wouldn’t trigger it.”

Fuyuhiko swore. “Tch, that might be what’s keeping the door closed. One of us staying won’t work.”

“We’ll use this,” said Chiaki, pulling out her student handbook. “If it’s still here, that’s proof the two towers are the same, right?”

Everyone agreed to try Chiaki’s method. The gamer felt relieved, glad she didn’t embarrass herself. The gamer struggled at times with putting her ideas into words. But since she conveyed her hypothesis well enough, everyone boarded the silent elevator back to Strawberry House to test her theory. They walked to the door in Strawberry Hall, Chiaki prepared to press the button and confirm the secret to the Funhouse. Before she could, Gundham used one of his hamsters to press the button, much to Sonia’s delight and Kazuichi’s annoyance. As Chiaki predicted, the door didn’t open right away.

After a few seconds, the door opened and Sonia gasped before pointing into Strawberry Tower. The handbook…! It’s really there…”

*I knew it*, thought Chiaki, picking up the handbook to confirm it belonged to her. “Yep, no doubt about it. This is my handbook.”

“That confirms it,” said Nagito. “Grape and Strawberry Tower are the same. Sadly, that means we have no idea where the exit is, but it wasn’t going to be that easy.” Nagito eyed Chiaki with appreciation. “I can’t believe you solved the mystery that quickly. Normally, you just stare into space, so I forget how you’re able to pull through for all of us!” Chiaki enjoyed the nods of agreement everyone gave.

“That reminds me,” said Nekomaru, “my clock says it’s past ten, but there’s been no announcement from Monokuma.”

“Allow me to explain,” said Monokuma, always on cue. “For the time being, the Monokuma Announcements will be on hiatus. Not that the time matters since there are no windows in here.”
Chiaki welcomed the late hours since exhaustion, or something akin to that, threaten to take her. Her body felt like it didn’t want to move or work anymore, perhaps another strange effect of her impromptu link with the Neo World Program. “I am getting sleep now that you mention it…” she said.

Nagito crossed his arms. “Conserving our energy is important since we’re going to be without food awhile. How about we decide on room assignments?”

“We can split them between the sexes,” said Gundham, a notion Kazuichi disliked since he’d like to bunk with Sonia. “Now, kittens, make your choice!”

“Let’s stay in Grape House since the all the bright red bothers my eyes,” said Chiaki, a fact that bright red bothered her eyes, an effect from having her eyes glued to digital pictures all her life.

“Oh, ha,” said Nekomaru, “then the men will get Strawberry since the bright red symbolizes the burning passion in our hearts!”

“But wait,” said Hajime, “if there’s two deluxe rooms, two crummy ones, and a standard—one guy isn’t going to have a room.

This intense dilemma offered a challenge that the guys agreed to decide over rock-paper-scissors. Nagito won first—an unsurprising result—and Gundham got second place which earned them the deluxe rooms. Nekomaru and Fuyuhiko won next, earning them the standard rooms. Kazuichi ended up getting the crappy one which meant Hajime was out of a place to sleep.

Chiaki and the girls decided their rooms smoothly enough. Chiaki managed to land a deluxe room with Sonia while Akane voluntarily took the crummy room. The gymnast said that setting comforted her more since it’s reminiscent of home with all her siblings.

“Hinata,” said Sonia, “feel free to use one of our remaining two rooms since we have standard and crummy left.”

The despair on Hajime’s face vanished and transferred to Kazuichi who yelled, “You can’t do that! He…he could still be the traitor.” Kazuichi glanced around, desperate for some back-up. None came.
“We haven’t doubted Hinata at all,” said Chiaki.

Nagito chuckled. “Seems like you’re on your own on this one.”

The mechanic flashed his ragged teeth. “You of all people are saying that!”

“Hinata,” said Chiaki, “please feel free to use one of our rooms.”

Hajime rubbed the back of his head. “Thanks… I’ll feel bad if I use the standard so I’ll just stick with the crummy. I’m just happy to have somewhere to sleep.”

With that, the disgruntled group of former Hope’s Peak students disbanded for their rooms. Chiaki’s group rode the silent elevator before arriving in Grape House again. Once Sonia announced she’d make nameplates for everyone, they left for their rooms. Chiaki wanted to speak with Hajime or any of her classmates privately just out of longing need to spend time with them again, but her mind kept going in and out like reception underground.

As Chiaki went towards her room, she came across Akane murmuring to herself. She had some time to spare. “Something wrong, Owari? I know going without food is hard—”

Akane waved her hand. “Nah, as much as that sucks, somethin’ Kuzuryu said is botherin’ me. He kept going on about how I shouldn’t feel crappy about what happened to Nidai. I’m still not sure what the hell he was goin’ on about…”

Chiaki grinned, Akane never the type to know how to express her feelings. “Kuzuryu has seen a lot and probably thinks what happened to Pekoyama and Koizumi was all this fault. He’s just trying to prevent you from making similar mistakes.”

Akane played with her hair, scuffing the ground with her shoe. “I guess…”

“You’re an anchor of motivation for this group, so we need you to stay positive, okay?”
Akane grinned, rubbing Chiaki’s cream-colored hair roughly. “Hehe, damn right! If I get too hungry, I’ll just feast on that bastard Monokuma!”

“I don’t think that’ll go over well…”

“Not with that attitude. Just gotta be tough like the statue of the awesome lookin’ woman downstairs.” Akane yawned. “I’m turning in. Later.”

Akane closed the door behind her; Chiaki wished she had the ability to turn off the sadness at the drop of a hat like she did. Goodness knows that skill would’ve helped in many situations she found herself in. Just as she turned towards her room, she heard a familiar cough come around the corner near the lounge. This must’ve been the third time they happened to find each other alone. “Hinata?”

The former Reserve Course student chuckled, seeming guilty. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop like that. It seemed personal so I didn’t want to interrupt…..”

Chiaki shook her head. “We were just standing in the middle of the hallway after all.”

“Still, I probably should’ve come back.”

“No, I should’ve been more considerate since I knew your room was right there…” The two glanced away from each other, the conversation with no cohesion. This was awkward. What confused Chiaki is she knew why it was awkward for her, but Hajime’s demeanor suggested he felt the same. What did he have to be awkward about?

“That was a good thing you did, what you said to Owari.”

“I just said what I thought. She’s always been able to rebound quickly.”

“It shows how much you care about others. You seem so distant all the time, so it’s easy to forget how helpful you’ve been since the first day. Especially with this whole traitor thing…” Hajime balled his fists.
“Please don’t hold it against them. Soda is scared since he doesn’t know what’s going on. Komaeda is…well, he’s just Komaeda. I doubt either of them actually thinks you’re a traitor.”

“You’re right… Man, what a screwed-up situation this is. I can’t believe Monokuma is going to make us kill someone or starve…”

“This is an escape game, right? Then, there must some way out here.”

“You heard what he said; only once death has happened are we free to go. You did great solving the Funhouse mystery, but that just confirmed this place has no exits. The only thing that I can think of is the Final Dead Room—”

“You can’t!” Chiaki didn’t mean to startle Hajime, but she worried desperation would make him do something Junko wanted him to. “We absolutely cannot let Monokuma trick us into going in there. I just feel whatever is in there won’t make anything better…”

Hajime closed his eyes. “Sorry, guess nerves are starting to get to me already. Monokuma never explicitly said anything useful would be in there. Knowing him, he’d make us swim in a pool of sharks until we find out the prize is an autographed picture of himself.”

Chiaki grinned, able to see Junko doing that. “We need to stick together and find a way out of this. There’s a way out of here without anyone else having to die, hopefully.”

Hajime yawned, stretching. “We can think up some ideas tomorrow. I’m struggling to stay awake…”

“You really don’t have to stay in that room. No one would blame you if you took the standard room.”

“No, it’s fine.” Hajime put his hands on the creaky doorknob before he paused. “I don’t mean this negatively since I know you love games…but it’s nice to see you’re coming out your shell more and more. You’ve been invaluable in the past trials and you outdid yourself again.” Hajime smiled. “You really are much more than a gamer.”

“Y-yeah…” murmured Chiaki, eyes unable to meet Hajime, her face hot as he went in his room. The parallel was uncanny. Hajime’s last words to her before becoming Izuru Kamakura sounded
just like what he said now. Even without his memories, he came to the same conclusion about her. Mind, body, and now her heart worn out, Chiaki stumbled into her deluxe room. She shut the door behind her, eyes closed, and leaned against the door until she slid to the floor. The gamer wanted some relaxation, but she knew her day wasn’t over yet—as evident by the woman sitting crossed-legged at the green desk, flipping through a magazine.

“This outfit I wore actually has a cool story behind it,’ said Junko. The magazine had her on the front, posing seductively in a uniform Chiaki could only describe as “magical-girl-like” or something in that area. “I came up with the look myself and love, love, loved it! But my pushy manager kept saying it was too bold for a newcomer like myself. I said screw it and wore the outfit. Boom, my popular exploded once more! Gosh, I was so ambitious about my career back then…”

Chiaki stared at her nonplussed. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Oh, no reason. Just showing off how I make any look work since I’m not a nobody, gaming dweeb.”

“… What are you playing at? The motive this time is completely unfair.”

Junko laughed. “Life is unfair, nobody. I could just give you something easy and more catered to the collective IQ of you chumps, but that’d be irresponsible of me.”

Chiaki stood. “This isn’t what Junko Enoshima would do at all. You like to meticulously set the stage, then take enjoyment when someone finally gives into despair. But this…this is just throwing us in a cage and waiting on your heels. Why the laziness this time, Junko?”

Junko’s amused look faded some. “If your idealized version of Junko Enoshima is right, then yes, the Funhouse might seem like I’m pressing the fast-forward button. But you forget: I’m not forcing you to kill anyone. Why, if you’re so against the idea, then just sit on your hands and do nothing.”

“Stop acting like we have a choice. I mean, if someone doesn’t kill…we’ll…”

“You’ll all starve to death, yep.” Junko smirked. “You claim you’re my ideological equal and you can’t even convince those chumps to starve themselves and be a martyr of hope to all watching? Tch, I convinced a crazy cult to starve themselves on a dare when I was sixteen. Surely, your precious classmates who love you so much shouldn’t be that hard to convince.”
Chiaki furrowed her brow. She didn’t have an answer for Junko’s goading. What was she supposed to say to the others? Die a painful, self-inflicted death so you can prove a point to people you don’t even know are watching? She struggled for a retort before her mind and body began to fail her again. It took a moment for her to regain herself. “What is happening to me...?"

“It’s a side effect from the way you connected with the Neo Word Program. From what I can gather, you’ve linked your mind into the program with a command that allows you to control the actions the A.I. What you’re experiencing is the connection getting sluggish because you haven’t allowed your mind to rest all day. A blessing and a curse. While you don’t suffer from hunger, you never know when the connection will weaken. How inconvenient in a killing game, hehe.”

Another limitation, thought Chiaki.

Junko laughed again. “Watching your futile attempt to change this game is amazing, nobody. You want so bad to tip the scales, but the moment you say something wrong—it all crumbles down. Meanwhile, I can do whatever the hell I want while my control over the program increases by the second. It’s like watching a one-legged fox chasing a squirrel.”

“And you still choose a challenge like this. You could’ve made the Funhouse anything and chose to make it a place where someone must die. Some escape game that is.” One thing that seemed to get under Junko’s nerves was the assertion she rigged the game to be harder because of Chiaki’s influence. More than the game itself, Junko cared about how she played the game. Whether she started changing the game because of Chiaki was true or not, it always got a reaction from the evil blond.

Rolling her eyes, Junko said, “What do you think this is exactly? A game of checkers? An innocent match of Ping-Pong? You entered my game Chiaki Nanami, and now you’ve discovered what everybody already knew: You’re no match for me. And now you want to cry foul play?” Once again, Junko laughed. “Nice to know Izuru Kamakura really was a fucking idiot all along.”

“I’m not saying you wouldn’t do underhanded things; I never thought gave you that much credit. But...it’s just you do things with almost no chance of success when it comes to me, yet you give Naegi and Hinata fighting chances. Why?”

“I don’t. Your path to victory is easy; just convince the others to starve to death. Or, you know, you could take one for the team.”
“No one else dying.”

Junko shrugged, shutting her magazine. “To each’s own. If I get to watch you slowly fall into despair as you witness those chumps descend into madness, I’ve got all the entertainment I need.”

Just before Junko vanished, Chiaki asked, “Why aren’t you doing that weird personality thing?”

“Huh?”

“When you change personalities because you’re bored a lot of the time? I haven’t seen you do that once.”

Junko’s crystal eyes shifted to the side before she put her hands up and said, “It slips my mind sometimes.” Junko’s form vanished in the blink of an eye, Chiaki finally having the peace and solitude she sought after this long day.

“All this, and I’ve only been here a day…” she murmured. Right as the gamer pulled off her hoodie and climbed on to the bed, something felt off. Analyzing the problem, she went to the desk Junko sat at, took her magazine, and through it in the trash before beginning her long-needed respite from today’s hectic activity.

VVV

Chiaki never liked waking up in a bad mood, almost as much as she hated waking up to an alarm clock. She awoke close around ten and sighed when the screwed-up events of yesterday entered her mind. After making sure Junko wasn’t lurking anywhere to give her another morning greeting, she hopped out of bed and went to the grape lounge. Her mind and body didn’t randomly quit on her like it was last night, meaning Junko’s explanation of her mind needing rest or the connection weakened held water.

She greeted all her fellow Grape House roommates as they entered. Not a day passed, and she could see the effects of going a day without any food. They wore grim expressions, small conversations replaced the usual energetic morning chatter, and they seemed more agitated and tired. As the guys from Strawberry House came over, she saw the same effects on them minus Nekomaru because of his mechanical form.
Chiaki spent the day investigating every inch of the Funhouse to find a hidden exit. Conversation with her former classmates is something she would’ve liked, but she knew the priority was to discover a flaw in this facility’s design. Despite her efforts lasting from morning to the afternoon, she discovered nothing of note. After encouraging all her classmates as much as she could, she turned in as the end of the second day drew near. She jumped on the bed, her hood over her head, face buried in the pillow as frustration set in.

*There really isn’t any other way out of here*…she thought. Her desire to defy Junko wanted to deny it, but the Funhouse didn’t have any other exists. She looked everywhere…well, except for the Final Dead Room. But she stuck to her inkling and told everyone to avoid that room like a swarm of man-eating locus. But how long would they listen? The gamer had no other ideas. The walls of the Funhouse suddenly began to look like the dark walls in the dungeon her execution happened.

“My, my,” said Monokuma, appearing before her, “are you giving up already even though it’s only the second day? That’s not a good sign, you know?”

Chiaki never wanted to hear Junko’s nonsense, but she especially didn’t want to now. “What do you want? And why are you in that form?”

“Well, I can’t show you my beautiful body all the time. Don’t want to spoil the fans too much or they might not come back! Besides, cutting the feed in the area and changing forms every time we talk is tiresome and I’m only here for a short announcement.”

“And that is…?”

“In order to help motivate you all, please gather in the grape tower tomorrow morning at seven!”

If Chiaki didn’t know he wasn’t real, she would’ve strangled the monochrome bear. Petty as it might’ve seemed considering everything else, Chiaki *really* didn’t like waking up that early.

“Why do I—”

“You’ll see; chow!” Monokuma vanished, leaving Chiaki in a more annoyed stated than when he intruded.

The next morning came, Chiaki forcing herself out of bed. As instructed, she went to Grape Tower
with the group to see what Junko had planned. She didn’t know what else to expect in retrospect. She forced them to do a fitness routine, Monokuma Tai Chi she referred to it, preaching it was for their health when she obviously meant to tire the already starving students. After forcing everyone to do it, Monokuma vanished after announcing this would be the morning routine every day, leaving everyone in a sweaty daze. The gamer glared at Monokuma as he gave her a wink, her unconditional hatred of Junko growing.

All of this, just because she desired the despair of Chiaki Nanami. And it was working. The group started bickering among each other, their morale decreasing, the growing talks of a murder happening sounding less and less of an impossibility.

“Stop this, guys!” yelled Hajime. “I’d rather…I’d rather starve to death than kill anybody…”

“How the fuck can we calm down!” yelled Kazuichi. “Are you really telling us to just starve to death! Ah…I get it. Why should the traitor be afraid of starving to death? I bet your Future Foundation buddies have a five-course meal waiting in your room.”

Hajime expression sour. “D-Damn it, if you don’t quit saying that, I swear—”

“Stop it!” yelled Chiaki louder than she knew she could. If this were her real body, she probably would’ve hurt her throat. But it succeeded since everyone calmed down, surprised Chiaki had that outburst in her. Looking at the group, panting, she said, “Please…please let’s just calm down. The arguing will just make this worse…”

Nagito chuckled. “To starve to death or to kill… What is the true hope in this situation?” Nagito weakly walked off, a smile still plastered on his face despite it all. “Best make your decision soon you all… We don’t have much time left!”

One-by-one, everyone left, not speaking a word to each other nor making eye contact. Everyone stared off into space while they exited the tower. The gamer stayed, opting to sit and hug her knees in the middle of the green tower. She didn’t regret infiltrating the Neo World Program, but the weight of her choice caught up with her. Her friends were dying slow deaths, Junko laughed the entire time, and the gamer couldn’t stop it. Why…why could she never stop it? Whatever Chisa’s motivation was, Chiaki believed that her theory on Junko maybe, just maybe—could’ve been true.

But what was it? Just what could there be to exploit from the calculating mastermind? Whatever it is, Chiaki had failed to capitalize on it so far. Right now, all her efforts amounted to is stopping the inevitable murder coming soon. *In the end, is that all I can do…?* she thought. *Is delaying as far as I can accomplish against Junko…?* Ms. Yukizome…what would you… Chiaki discarded the
thought. She didn’t care what she would do; the housekeeper wouldn’t help her anyway, as evident by her sudden betrayal when things got too rough. The gamer only regretted believing in that savior nonsense for a little bit.

Chiaki departed the Grape Tower after pushing through her brooding. One she was in the hall, her eyes landed on Hajime. She called to him, but he didn’t answer. He stumbled around, a desperate look in his eyes. The gamer didn’t see this turning out well and decided to tail him. She had to wait since Hajime entered the elevator, on his way to Strawberry House, confirming the suspicion of where Chiaki guessed Hajime wanted to go. Honing her button pressing skills, Chiaki pressed the elevator button until it finally came back and opened for her.

Hinata, please don’t do it… she thought, hoping in the silent elevator, tapping her foot in impatience. The moment the doors opened to reveal the strawberry covered area, Chiaki spotted Hajime leaning against the wall, next to the Final Dead Room Door. Right as he reached to open it, Chiaki grabbed his arm and said, “… Don’t do this.” Hajime’s distressed eyes fell on her. What you’re looking for isn’t in there.” It was like stepping back in time. Hajime’s eyes had the same pain as the final day she talked to the real him.

“Th…that’s not true, Nanami! The exit is in there! We don’t have to starve to death!”

Hajime’s spoke loudly, voice filled with anxiety. Chiaki kept her composure, aware of how he suffered. “All that’s in there is the Life-Threating Game. Even if you cleared it, the only thing left is the weapon Monokuma prepared. Is that what you want? Do you want a weapon, Hinata?”

He didn’t answer.

“Do you need a weapon…?” Once again, no answer. “I followed you because you had an intense, almost feral look on your face. Looks like I made a good choice.” Chiaki slid her hand down his arm until it reached his hand. Smiling she said, “Let’s go back, Hinata, okay?”

Chiaki walked towards the elevator but stopped when she Hajime refused to budge. They both stared in opposite directions, her at the elevator and Hajime at the Final Dead Room. Neither spoke a word as Chiaki refused to let go of her grip. So, she tried again, this time achieving her desired result. Hajime followed her lead.

“Nanami…” he murmured as Chiaki pulled him along. “How can you do it…? How can you still keep hope in a situation like this…?”
“…Because you’re all with me. I let you all down in the past…and I’ll risk my life to keep it from happening again. That’s why…I’ll rebel against this despair until I’m gone…”

“Heh, it’s weird… It feels almost like…déjà vu right now.”

“If only I could’ve gotten you to follow me…in the past…”

The gamer shouldn’t have said that. However, if Hajime did wonder what she meant, he didn’t say anything. Instead, the two walked hand-and-hand back to their dorms to rest for another day of this despair, Hajime’s rumbling stomach audible as they entered the silent elevator.
Chiaki walked across the bridge leading to the amusement park, the fake sun already behind the horizon. She held the straps of her pink backpack between her thumb and index finger, tugging on them to calm herself. The past twenty-four hours wasn’t fun. She figured once they departed the hellhole called the Funhouse, everyone’s spirits would rise. The opposite happened. The group had indeed left the Funhouse hours ago but at a grievous cost. Her heart dropped upon discovering Nekomaru—or Mechamaru to be more precise—lying in an oily mess on the floor of Grape Tower. Another defeat smashed across her head courtesy of Junko.

And as the rules of this cruel game went, the investigation and class trial came next. She didn’t want to, she really didn’t want to, but she had no choice but to give both proceedings her all the prevent the entire group from dying. Still, that didn’t make the sight of Gundham’s execution any easier to witness. In a way, it seemed she did inspire one of her friends to take measures for everyone’s survival, but not the way she wanted.

With everyone recovering from both exhaustion of mind and body, the survivors turned in for the night—except Chiaki. The gamer quietly made her way from the housing area to the destination she planned to visit in private beforehand if not for the sour surprise of the Funhouse. She needed a plan, she needed anything that’d give her some advantage in this game. Improvising wasn’t going to cut it, not against Junko. And there’s only one other she could talk to about this now.

She reached out and knocked on the door, double checking for any of her friends. If any of them spotted her doing this, suspicion would befall her like an avalanche. The door in front of her opened as a welcomed friend smiled.

“Nanami!” cheered Monomi. “You weren’t seen?”

Chiaki shook her head. “No one saw me.” Junko always had eyes on everything but she doubted the blond cared enough to interfere in a conversation between them.

“Come on in! I made tea!”

As expected, the moment Chiaki entered Monomi’s house, pink hit her eyes from all directions. A giant pink curtain overhead spread to most of the room, most of the furniture and the décor had similar colors except for the polka dot wallpaper. It made sense her house looked like a kindergarten class. The room also had many monitors stationed which Monomi used for
surveillance, or rather she should’ve been if Junko hadn’t taken control of the program.

“Careful, it’s hot,” said Monomi handing Chiaki a saucer carrying a porcelain cup of tea. “I’d love to have a nice chat…but I doubt you’re here to just hang out.”

Chiaki took a sip, the heat not bothering her at all, sitting on Monomi’s soft bed. “I don’t know what to do, Monomi… Every time I think I have a hold on this game, Monokuma pulls something out that changes the dynamic completely, it’s just too hard with how much control he has over the program.” Chiaki neglected to say Junko’s name since the annoying monochrome bear and the mastermind were one in the same. Explaining the whole story to Monomi wasn’t necessary right now.

Monomi’s ears dropped. “Yeah…I’m sorry. Monokuma stripped me of all the administrator privileges I had. And the others are so distrusting of me, all I can do is help clear islands for them. I don’t even know if that’s for the best anymore…”

“No, for better or worse, traveling to each island is the only way to progress. He’d probably force us to go anyway. Isn’t there any countermeasure we could take?”

“I’m afraid not, dear. Alter Ego is trying, but it won’t be long before he’s rendered completely ineffective too.”

“Alter Ego?”

“Hehe, you don’t remember our own brother, silly? He’s the one working on countering the virus behind the scenes, and he’s the spinning image of our creator—our father Chihiro Fujisaki.”

Chihiro Fujisaki… Where do I— Then, the memories of the programmer who met an unfortunate end in the mutual killing game of the seventy-eighth class arrived. Miaya said she scavenged the source code for the Neo World Program from the data he had. Giving him all the credit and making the programs acknowledge him as the true creator is something the kind therapist would do.

“We’re one big digital family!” said Monomi sticking out her paw.

Monokuma can’t win the game if we don’t kill. So, I hoped we could take a united stand and force him to put us in a final trial. If I win, he makes us graduate. Except now…I’m afraid one of the others might do something.”

“Komaeda, you mean…”

During the turbulent investigation after Nekomaru’s death, Nagito took it upon himself to do something Chiaki hoped no one would—he explored the Final Dead Room. Thanks to his ungodly luck, he managed to emerge victoriously. On one hand, him winning revealed the Funhouse was the Ultimate Weapon all along which helped with the trial. On the other, he got another prize—secret files just like the Future Foundation ones Monokuma gave them. While Nagito acted coy and the information was barebones…Chiaki had her suspicions.

“I think he knows, Monomi; he hid a lot of the actual information. I think he knows about me, you, this world…and what he and the others truly are.” Chiaki rubbed her head. The worst person that information could’ve fallen into the hands of might have gotten it, no doubt another situation Junko counted on happening. *It always like I’m five steps back…*

“That’s very troublesome if he knows. If the others learn about their true identities, who know how they’ll react…?”

“I don’t think that’s the main concern. Jun…I mean, Monokuma is always leaving the trail for the next murder to happen. I have no doubt Komaeda was the exact person he wanted to find that information. And if he knows the truth about everything…the seeds for the next incident might already be there…”

“So, you fear Komaeda might kill because of his hatred for despair.?”

“Yeah, I think he’ll try what he did in the first trial. Komaeda is the type of person who’ll go to the extreme for his beliefs. If he thinks everyone here is a Despair, he’ll think of a way to kill them. If I had to guess, he’ll get the others to kill, or he might do it himself and lie”

Troubled, Monomi said, “I fear you’re right. And we can’t forget that timer in the park. With such little time left, it won’t be long before Monokuma does something drastic.”

Chiaki hadn’t been able to figure out the timer in the park since day one. She pressed Junko on it during one of their confrontations, but the blond never gave her a direct answer. “For now, I’ll
focus on Komaeda.”

“I’ll try my best too, but it’s hard doing anything since Monokuma is always breathing down my neck.” Monomi sighed. “You know what it’s like having someone always waiting to make your day worse…?”

Chiaki giggled. “I can imagine.”

The two talked for a bit longer before parting ways for the night. Chiaki didn’t want to stay too long just in case Junko had any late-night surprises. The digital stars overhead projected a shadow is it followed her back the central island. Her mind, so full of thoughts about what to do about Nagito, prevented her from running into a solid object. At first, she thought it was a wall; she was wrong.

“Ah, Nanami,” said Nagito, peering down at her, the moonlight bouncing off his pale hair with a haunting luminescence. “What are you up to on this lovely night?”

Chiaki took a few steps back, putting her “game” face on. “I wanted to clear my head after everything that happened… What were you doing?”

“Thinking.” Nagito’s demeanor changed since the Funhouse. Normally, he’d be polite in tone and expression to the everyone since he worshipped the Ultimates. Now, he always seemed annoyed, like talking to them was a bother. This change in attitude makes sense considering her might know the truth. “Careful on the way back… You never know what surprised await in this place.”

As he walked past her, Chiaki wavered between what to do, and finally, she said, “Komaeda. Everyone…everyone here wants to go home. I don’t know why you’re acting strangely, but remember the only enemy here is Monokuma. We need to stick together so no one else has to die…” Nagito stopped once she called out to him but refused to turn around.

“The only enemy, huh…? All my life, I looked up to those with talent because I considered the talented the ones who’ll carve a path to a bright future for everyone. Because of that, someone insignificant like me won’t hesitate to be a step on that path.”

“So, why have you changed? Ever since coming out of the Final Dead Room, you’ve been acting even stranger…’’
Nagito didn’t answer immediately. “I’ve had...a shift in perspective. My feelings towards helping those who embody hope hasn’t changed. Rather, I’ve decided that all of you aren’t worth helping.” Nagito faced her, wearing a disgusted expression. “You think I’d risk my life for a talentless Reserve Course student like Hinata—”

“Who cares?” Chiaki interrupted. “Why does Hinata having a talent or not matter? Togami, Hanamura, Koizumi, Pekoyama, Mioda, Saionji, Tsumiki, Tanaka, Nidai: do you honestly think talent gave them solace in their last moments? I bet all of them would’ve traded in their talent if it meant they didn’t have to be a part of this horrible game!”

Nagito smirked, unfazed by her sudden emotions. “Worthy sacrifices,” he said, causing Chiaki to glance away in appalment. “As I said, I’ve reconsidered. I no longer see them or the others as hope worth fighting for. Now, for my final act, I’m going to atone for my mistakes and set everything right.” Nagito turned his back on her once more. “Only then, in my atonement, can I be recognized as a symbol of hope...”

“And I’m going to do my best to save everyone, including you.”

Nagito laughed. “Don’t get me mistaken. I still like all of you, even a talentless nobody like Hinata. I don’t get complete jubilation from this. That’s what makes it a tragedy.” He glanced back at her. “Strangely, even now, I still can’t help but be enraptured by the hope you exude... Take care, Nanami.”

The lucky student left the gamer by herself. Her suspicion became a fear; from that conversation, she could tell Nagito knew everything. But there was another question she couldn’t determine. Did he know she was the traitor? If he did, from his perspective, she’s the only good one in this game. If he knew that, what would it change? “Ugh,” groaned Chiaki, “every time I get through one ordeal, another is ready and waiting...”

Chiaki walked back to her cottage, deciding to keep a close eye on Nagito’s activity from now on. In a way, his actions scared her more than Junko’s. She gazed up at the fake sky before entering her room, wondering what those in the Future Foundation thought of this chaos.

VVV

Like every morning, everyone gathered at the restaurant for breakfast. Chiaki and the other tried their best to have a somewhat casual conversation, attempting to instill just a little normalcy to all this. But they were far beyond that now. This game had gone on long enough for the despair Junko shot them with every day to feel natural. The much quieter breakfast served as a harrowing
reminded of how little of them remained.

On a troubling note, no one knew where Nagito was. Chiaki checked his cottage, and she never got an answer. He’s likely already making moves, meaning the countdown to the next tragedy began ticking. Chiaki made sure to get the point across to the others to watch out for him and make sure he didn’t try anything else.

After Hajime explained his origin as a Reserve Course student—to which he received support from everyone, especially Chiaki—Monomi appeared, blood from her bout with the last Monobeast. She opened the way to the final island. The group hesitated at first since if history repeated itself, a new island meant a new murder. But the group rallied behind the gusto Gundham and Nekomaru put into them and decided to brave the new area, finishing this game.

If there was ever one good thing to say about Junko, she certainly had a unique vision. The final island was different from anything encountered so far. The theme was an urban metropolitan city straight out of the cyberpunk genre. Chiaki might’ve enjoyed the view under different circumstances since she loved cyberpunk games for their unique visuals and themes, but all she saw in front of her is more opportunities for murder.

A nice and familiar scent entered Chiaki nose, leading her to an area packed with food vendors like the kind at a festival. As far as dangerous areas where killing could happen, this place seemed harmless enough. She expected Akane to come running first, but the only person present was Fuyuhiko, arms crossed as he peered down in deep thought. Chiaki approaching him before she said, “Kuzuryu?”

“Ah!” he gasped, his one eye widened as he jumped back. He put a hand on his chest and eased up when he noticed Chiaki. “Shit, where did you learn to walk all quiet like that? Even Peko had trouble catching me by surprise.”

Whoops, thought Chiaki. She practiced using silent stepping so much, sometimes it happened without thinking. Since Fuyuhiko hung around dangerous types, he’d notice when a mere gamer used such a skill. The gamer decided to go with her golden excuse. “Um…I saw it in a game once.”

The excuse worked since Fuyuhiko rubbed his head, sighing. “Man, I must still be exhausted from what that bastard Monokuma put us through. Anyway, this area doesn’t seem like much. Baring Akane eating herself to death, that is.”

There wasn’t much left to discover at the food vendors so Chiaki explored the island more until she came across a factory with Monokuma’s face plastered on it; the gamer hesitated. Last time she
went to something with Monokuma’s face in it, it led them to the Funhouse. However, once Hajime showed up, they decided to carefully inspect the area since something of importance could be there.

The factory contained a long conveyor belt manufacturing Monokuma’s from coconut trees. The Monokuma’s in the bin turned out to be plushies, confusing Chiaki since this seemed pointless. After the real Monokuma appeared, blathering about things Chiaki only half paid attention to, he told them to head for the warehouse next door. Chiaki and Hajime agreed to check it out.

Inside the warehouse was, unsurprisingly, more Monokuma merchandise. At this point, Chiaki didn’t know if Junko played a narcissist or if she couldn’t help herself. After more shenanigans with Monokuma and Monomi, Chiaki and Hajime left as quickly as they could, finally assured they wasted their time.

The next destination gave Chiaki a fright. She feared one of the locations on this island could have anything that’d make killing easier; in a not subtle turn, she walked into a military base stacked with weapons. These objects weren’t props either. Guns, rifles, tanks, grenades, and other military-grade weaponry laid spewed about the area. It was like jumping into one of those old action films from America. Well, thought Chiaki, this could be problematic...

“Isn’t it wonderful, Nanami!” said Sonia, starry-eyed like she was in a fantasy world. Now that the gamer thought about it, Sonia did tell her about how she admired weaponry and warfare. “I’d only seen these objects in my country’s classes on modern warfare; I always wanted to visit a military base.”

“This place won’t be much use to us then,” said Hajime. “Not unless we want to get in a firefight with Monokuma… I somehow doubt we’d win that.”

“Yes, if humans aren’t using them, weapons are nothing but scrap metal,” said Sonia. “However, there’s something interesting I came across.” Sonia pulled out a document labeled “Jabberwock Island Development Plan.” Chiaki concealed her surprise since she recalled reading this document months ago during work. “I found it in the tank’s operating seat.”

Hajime took the documents and searched over them intently. “The hell? This says Jabberwock was supposed to be a key location for the Future Foundation. Why would they need a tourist area?”

“That caught my attention as well. Apparently, the travel agency that managed this place went bankrupt; as a result, this island became uninhabited. It was unaffected by the ‘incident’ as the documents label it.”
Hajime crossed his arms. “What incident…?”

“If you’ll recall the guidebook about Jabberwock found in the library, it said the central island holds a large administrative building.”

“That was supposed to be the Future Foundation’s headquarters…but it doesn’t exist.” Hajime scratched his head. “Damn it…what does it all mean?”

“… Maybe that’s the main mystery of this island,” said Chiaki, obviously knowing the truth about this fake island. “Now that we have access to all the islands, we’ll find the truth eventually.”

Chiaki continued exploring on her own since Hajime wanted to search for anything else Monokuma might’ve left behind at the base. Her search brought her to a large facility called Sea King Industries. The place manufactured machines like humanoid robots and huge creatures resembling the Monobeasts. Kazuichi also discovered some emails on the main computer, claiming he found a funny fictional story that sounded exactly like the Tragedy. Not wanting to say anything unnecessary, Chiaki agreed before leaving. With all this information about the real world becoming known, the gamer guessed Junko was gearing up for the finale of this game.

Finally, after everyone circumnavigated the last island, Fuyuhiko called on everyone to gather at the food vendors. They all began to discuss their findings and speculate on what it all meant and what to do next. Chiaki’s mind, however, became consumed with one person. No matter where she searched, the gamer didn’t find Nagito. She hoped he’d come to investigate too, but the pale-haired boy never showed up.

“Honestly, there is no such thing as a traitor!” yelled Sonia, in an intense argument. “Monokuma lied to split us apart. Can anyone truly think such a thing after everything?”

“What weak reasoning,” said Nagito, appearing so spontaneously, Chiaki thought he was Monokuma.

“Where the hell have you been?” asked Hajime.

“Not spinning my wheels unlike all of you. I’m looking for someone, the odd one out from all of us. At first, because of what we learned about the killing school trip, I considered it was Togami. But it can’t be. The way he died all in vain just didn’t seem right, you know?”
Sonia clenched her fists. “Don’t say Togami died in vain when he saved your life! The way you have been acting lately after the Funhouse… I don’t care for this Komaeda at all!”

“Tch,” spat Akane, “I never cared for this freak since the beginning!”

“Aww… I’m being hated right now. Understandable since you’re all too ignorant to understand my suffering. The truth can be a hard thing to know…”

“What are you going to do?” asked Chiaki.

“You’ll see after I capture the traitor.”

“There isn’t a traitor!” yelled Sonia.

Ignoring her completely, Nagito smiled as he said, “Truth be told, I’m not certain who it is yet. But it won’t take me long! I’ll weed them out, even if I die for it!”

“Oh, please!” yelled Kazuichi. “If anything, the only person here who’d be the traitor is you!”

Nagito laughed at the assertion. “Tell me, if I’m able to wipe out the despair on this island… will I become Ultimate Hope…?”

“Oh, Ultimate Hope…?” repeated Hajime, grabbing his head.

“Well, I’m going now. And if any of you see Monokuma, tell him a motive isn’t necessary this time. I’m going all out, plus the ending is likely next anyway.”

Chiaki took a step forward, hand to her chest. “What does that mean…? What are you going to do, Komaeda…?”

“…Bye.” Just like last night, he ignored her and left, leaving the remaining survivors of this game
in bewilderment. Chiaki feared the possibility, but now she was sure. The final obstacle would be Nagito Komaeda.

VVV

As they discussed before turning in yesterday, the group gathered in the restaurant early to discuss what to do with Nagito—a minor annoyance since Chiaki’s connection acted up more than usual today resulting in her “falling asleep” for small intervals. Personally, Chiaki wanted to find him, sit him down, and try to better understand where he was coming from. However, the discourse had gotten so heated, that kind of negotiation seemed impossible to the others now., leading to Kazuichi suggesting a plan Chiaki really didn’t want to take part in.

“So, I’ve come up with the plan to capture Komaeda. One of us will act as a decoy, lure him to the lobby, then the two task force members will move in and capture him! I’ll be the commander, the task force members will be Fuyuhiko and Akane, and the decoy will be none other than…Chiaki Nanami!”

Oh no…thought Chiaki, sighing. “No way. It’s not like I ever agreed to this plan…”

Kazuichi gasped at the rejection of his plan. “Oh, come on, you’ll be fine. I mean, I can’t ask Miss Sonia to do something like this. Come on, I’m begging ya!”

Fuyuhiko shook his head. “If Koizumi was here, she’d rightly give you a kick in the ass.”

“You did say you can never accept killing, right…?” Kazuichi got closer and closer to the gamer, putting more pressure on her to give an answer he wanted. “Didn’t I just say I’m begging!”

Hajime stepped between them. “Why do you have to snap at her like that?”

Chiaki considered what to say. She didn’t think the others would go for a peaceful mediation after witnessing Nagito’s madness. At least this way, she could get an audience with the lucky student alone and sway his opinion. “…Fine,” she said.

Kazuichi cheered loudly, a feeling short lived after his beloved Ultimate Princess emasculated him once more. After everyone reaffirmed their roles in capturing Nagito, the group split up for now to prepare. Chiaki went back to her cottage, wanting solace to better think of how to progress through
this latest roadblock. That was her mistake. She should’ve learned by now that solace never existed
in this game.

“Gosh, how do people find this kind of mind-numbing thing fun?” said Junko’s sitting cross-
legged on the ground, currently matching Chiaki’s high score in the game she played. “Imagine the
poor bastard that had this of all things be their talent—” Junko stopped playing, facing the agitated
face of Chiaki as if she didn’t hear her come in. “Oh, well this is unexpected.”

“You planned all of this, didn’t you?” said Chiaki. “You wanted Komaeda to go in the Final Dead
Room and find those documents because you knew the way he’d react once he knew the truth.
Actually…you somehow manipulated the odds so that he wouldn’t shoot himself too.”

Junko rolled her eyes. “Is this how it’s going to happen every time I get the upper hand? You’re
going to ignore how you got outplayed and keep saying I cheated?”

“You’ve done it before.”

“Ya got me there.” Junko tossed the controller aside, a hand on her hip as she stood. “Do you want
to know the real reason you’re going to lose, nobody? You’ve misunderstood the nature of this
game. You came in assuming we’d be going at it head-to-head to see whether you can conquer my
despair. Wrong, wrong, wrong. This game revolves around these chumps and how we can
manipulate them the way we want.”

Chiaki shook her head. “I’m not like you. I would never—”

“But that’s what you’re trying to do,” said Junko, a blunt tone. “You look at me spreading despair
as manipulating others. How is that any different than you, the Future Foundation, or Naegi when
they try the same with hope? Most people are followers, meaning those who have their ideals
realized must convince others to follow them. When you look at it, everything follows this trend in
our world.” Junko approached her, the two inches apart as Chiaki search for a rebuttal. “And that’s
why you can never win; you’ll never be able to defeat me in a game of ideals because you’ll never
be able to manipulate the human heart as I can.”

“… T-that’s not…” What could she say? When it came to words, charisma, and pure ability, she
couldn’t match Junko. It might’ve been Junko playing messing with her, but the gamer suddenly
felt like she misunderstood this entire thing. “I could’ve done better if I’d have been here earlier…”
“Excuses. You knew what you signed up for.” Junko sighed, wearing an annoyed expression. “I’m starting to despair a little. For a moment, I thought maybe you could provide somewhat of a challenge, but no—my intuition was right once more. The only fun I’ll get is watching you writhe under your own defeat again.”

Chiaki took a step back, clenching her hands. “No… No, I’ll stop you this time! We’ll get past his and force you to make us graduate!”

“You fool.” Junko narrowed her eyes, her crystalline gaze piercing. “I’m now certain… You’re not even going to live to see the final part of this game.”

“What?” Junko vanished, leaving Chiaki confused by her final words. “Wait! Junko!” Her shouts went unanswered. Instead, the gamer sat on her bed with a bitter taste in her mouth. In those moments, the way Junko predicted her imminent defeat reminded her of Izuru doing the same that rainy day.

*Did I misunderstand Junko after all? Maybe coming here was a mistake…? No, I came here to save everyone! But…is it possible? Was everything Ms. Yukizome said really a lie? Does Junko really have a weakness…and can someone like me—*

The gamer’s paused when he realized what’s happening. Junko sunk despair and doubt into her. Even when she came here with the specific purpose of defeating the replica Junko, the blonde managed to make her stern conviction crumble with a few sentences. This was the power of Junko Enoshima, the absolute subjugation of someone’s will. And the gamer began to fall prey.

Chiaki rested for a bit, aiming to clear her head of Junko’s venomous words. She couldn’t enjoy her respite for long since Kazuichi’s “masterful” plan took place tonight, and Chiaki had to act as a decoy. Someone like Nagito wouldn’t fall for this obvious bait, but as she promised, the gamer went out to search for the lucky student. Hopefully, Chiaki could have some one-on-one time with him later.

Her search didn’t last for long since Nagito stood outside his cottage, almost like he expected company. “Komaeda,” said Chiaki, “you want to join me in the lobby of the hotel? There’s this game I want to play that requires two people.”

Grinning, Nagito said, “Oh, I figured with everything that’s happened, you wouldn’t want to play with someone like me.”
“I was hoping we could have a talk about all that. We could reach an agreement, I think. Plus, weighing my talent against yours sounds like a unique challenge.”

“Count me in! I’ll meet you there since I have some matters to attend to for a minute.”

*That was easy*, thought Chiaki, hiding skepticism behind her stoic face. “Alright, I’ll see you there, Komaeda.” She left him to whatever he had to do and headed for the restaurant. She ran into Kazuichi who was in the middle of a debate with Monomi on the plan to capture Nagito. The mechanic, steadfast in his plan, ignored the pink rabbit’s pacifistic plea. Chiaki entered the lobby—Akane and Fuyuhiko both ready to act—and went up to the restaurant. She sat at a table, putting her head down, unwilling to watch this unfold.

Her eyes wandered to Hiyoko’s demonic memorial for Mahiru. A pang went through her heart as she recalled all the fun times her and the red-headed photographer had. This triggered a huge trip down memory lane; she wished the Chiaki form back then treasured them a bit more in retrospect. 

Miaya said they could return, but…can I get everyone to that point? Everything I do, Junko’s seen through it before I’ve even thought of it, and made plans to counter it. I know there’s a weak point somewhere, but—

A violet shaking cut off her thoughts as a loud, defining sound came from somewhere. The gamer couldn’t even get a gasp out before she hit the floor, causing things to go black for a moment. The connection she had to the Neo World Program lagged and went in and out before it finally settled down after a minute. Chiaki stood, noticing the damage around her. It wouldn’t be a hyperbole to say a bomb hit the restaurant. Her mind going to the others’ well-being, she raced downstairs.

The lobby was in complete ruin. The walls blanked with soot, flames danced everywhere giving birth to all the smoke, and much of the actual structure was missing. Everyone minus Nagito stood around, their faces painted with shock, pain, and horror. The scene looked plucked out of a battlefield. “W-what happened…?” she stuttered.

“No…,” Kazuichi, who was in more tears than even Sonia, said. “Please…whoever the traitor is, just come
forward! I’m begging you guys…just, come forward….”

Chiaki bit her tongue. She couldn’t do that now. Everyone panicked and Nagito had bigger plans than just finding the traitor. Still…Chiaki didn’t know what else to do. Once again, just like the Funhouse, she didn’t know how to get out of this. Instead, she went to the arcade machines and pretended to mourn over their destruction.

VVV

The madness of yesterday continued early in the morning when Nagito appeared in the restaurant once again, claiming he hid the bombs somewhere they haven’t been before. He said he’d only tell them if the traitor comes forward. Chiaki, still unwilling, joined the others in searching Jabberwock for the supposed bombs that’d sink the island.

Once everyone arrived at the only place they didn’t check, Nezumi Castle, a gaping hole appeared where the locked doors were. Assuming Nagito blew it up, they entered the dark castle. The objects of interest were spear weapons and a plaque on the floor that read, “the password to guide everyone to the future.” Predictably, someone already scratched it out. Chiaki didn’t mind much since she knew about the secret measure Miaya took at the behest of Makoto, but the others started arguing in frustration once again.

In the end, today was just another frustrating day of no progress.

VVV

After frustratingly waking up early, everyone except Akane and Nagito arrived at the pool at the same time. Wondering where the missing duo was, everyone entered the restaurant, getting an unpleasant answer to that question.

“Where did you hide the bombs!” yelled Akane, pinning Nagito to the ground with her hands wrapped around his neck.

Despite the danger, Nagito seemed nonchalant. “If you want to know, you should really try something like torture. If you’re not willing to totally fill me with despair by stabbing my eyes out with a fork or something, you’ll never bre…gh…ghhhh!”
Everyone screamed at Akane in terror, begging her not to go through with it. But the gymnast had fury in her eyes, a chilling stare that convinced the others she'd indeed end Nagito’s life right there. There might have been a more “in character” way for Chiaki to act considering she needed to keep appearances, but her body ended up moving on its own. The next thing she knew, her hand slapped Akane across the face as hard as she could. The slap echoed in the now silent restaurant. “You’re not the kind of person who’d hurt someone, right?” said Chiaki, gently. “It’s alright.”

Akane blinked, wide-eyed as if she only now realized what she did. “S-sorry… I’m awake now…”

“Thanks for that, Owari,” said Nagito, rising to his feet, derangement in his eyes. “I actually got to see my dead dog again.

“You deserve it, crazy fucker,” said Fuyuhiko. “You probably egged Owari on.”

“Regardless, thanks for saving me, Nanami.”

Sonia approached Nagito. “If you truly mean that, tell us the password you destroyed.”

“Password? What do you want with that?”

“Don’t play dumb,” said Fuyuhiko. “You hide the bombs in that place, didn’t you?”

“I did… until yesterday. But looks like I made the right move since you guys would’ve found them before the traitor revealed themselves. Also, that password wouldn’t have done you guys any good at this stage, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Stop talking crazy and tell us where the fucking bombs are!”

“Then let us begin the final battle. The final battle between the traitor and everyone else… Between hope and despair! I hid the bombs in a place you all have visited before.”
“That’s too broad!” yelled Kazuichi.

“That I suggest you all cooperate… There’s no way hope can lose. Absolute hope that can break through any despair will never lose! I believe in you all…and more importantly, I believe in my Ultimate Luck!” Finishing his cryptic messages, Nagito left, leaving everyone in a worried and confused state.

Not having any option but to play Nagito’s game, everyone split up to search the island individually. Everyone tasked Chiaki with searching the third island. She searched the theater, hospital, and music venue, but still found nothing. At this point, she considering revealing herself to Nagito. The fact he hid bomb everywhere is insane, but Nagito caused a similar incident at Hope’s Peak Academy when everyone wanted to skip the exam. She believed he could do such a thing if motivated.

If I told him everything, what would it solve? thought Chiaki. He’d still want everyone dead because they’re Despairs. Maybe if I say I can fix it? I don’t know… Plus, what would Junko do in retaliation? Mulling it over more, Chiaki took a deep breath and nodded her head. “I’ll tell him the truth.”

“Chiaki!” yelled Hajime, running towards her. He reached her, hands on his knees. “Kuzuryu says he found the bombs in the plushie factory we saw. Everyone’s meeting up there.”

“… Got it.” Which would she do? Should she join up with everyone, or find Nagito and explain the truth? I’ll go check it out, then find Komaeda afterward.

She and Hajime split up, Hajime saying he was off to find Sonia. Chiaki traveled to the plushie factory on the fifth island, anxious from everything happening right now. Not long after, Hajime showed up with Sonia and they entered the factory. Inside, as Fuyuhiko said, the bombs were present on a truck. Closer inspection revealed, the engine acted as the detonator and the moment the truck ran out of gas…the bombs would go off. What’s worse, Nagito took prudent measures to make sure they couldn’t move the bombs or increase their time.

While everyone panicked, Chiaki, noticing something, and said, “Guys, check out this card reader.” Everyone focused on the machine while Chiaki began to put together a theory in her mind. “I bet if we swipe a card, it’ll stop the bombs.”

“That is possible…” said Kazuichi. “I mean, he’d need some way to stop them if he changed his mind, right?”
“No…he’s trying to make us do something. Knowing Komaeda, there might be another motive for this, I think…”

“Hold on…” said Hajime, walking over to the conveyor belt, bending down to examine laptop Chiaki hadn’t noticed. “What is—” The moment Hajime touched a key, a video started.

“Great work, everyone,” said Nagito, his face on the screen. “You managed to find the bombs. Believing in you was worth it.”

A video message? thought Chiaki.

“The key to stopping the bombs is the card reader I’m sure you all noticed. If you scan an e-Handbook, it will disarm the bombs. However, only the traitor’s handbook will stop them. I found out who the traitor is… I was annoyed when they didn’t come forward. But I wanted another battle. So come on, traitor… reveal yourself. Or will you let everyone die?”

“Bastard, this was his intention all along,” said Fuyuhiko.

“If there is a traitor,” said Kazuichi, looking at everyone individually, “they should come forward because they’re life is in danger too… right?”

“But…” murmured Hajime, concerned. “Will that even work…?”

Meanwhile, Chiaki had pieced together Nagito’s real intention. The bombs, the laptop, Nagito’s actual desire… she wished it’d happened sooner, but it all came to her. She pulled out her handbook, assured her hunch was right. “Fighting over this is stupid,” she said, putting her handbook up to the scanner. Shocked, the other’s gaped out her. Then, the scanner rejected her handbook. I knew it. “So, who’s next?”

“What the hell did you do that for!” yelled Kazuichi. “The wrong handbook could’ve blown it up!”

“… But it didn’t.”
“It’s cool she isn’t the traitor,” said Fuyuhiko, sweating, “but…what now?”

“Damn it!” yelled Kazuichi, checking inside the truck. “It’s out of gas!”

The other panicked even further, praying that the bombs would malfunction. However, Chiaki kept her nerve because if what she theorized was true, none of them were in any danger from an explosion. Echoing her feelings, Sonia appeared, yelling, “It’s alright; this is not a bomb!”

Immediately afterward, the truck stopped and…the bomb exploded, not into a violent array of searing hellfire, but a bunch of colorful sparks. “Fireworks…” murmured Chiaki. *Thought so.*

“It…” said Kazuichi, beside himself, “it wasn’t a bomb!”

“Look,” said Chiaki, gesturing towards the laptop. “There’s more.”

“Surprised?” said Nagito. “Come on, blowing up the whole island? Do you really think a guy like me is capable of something like that?”

“Bastard!” yelled Fuyuhiko, anger in his eye. “It was a bluff!”

“But what about that bomb at the hotel?” said Hajime.

Chiaki put a finger to her chin. “The Octagon in the funhouse, maybe?”

Akane scratched her head. “So, is he watchin’ us from somewhere? How did he plan this video so perfectly?”

“No,” said Kazuichi, “it looks like the video was set to play after the detonator went off. Still, why even have a video message in the first place…?”

Nagito’s video continued. “So, did the traitor come forward? Probably not, right? I’d love to know, so why don’t you guys come to the warehouse next door where I’ll be waiting for you? We’ll compare results and reveal who the real traitor is.”
Akane cracked her knuckles, marching towards the door. “This time, I’m really gonna beat the crap out of him!”

“I’ll deliver the killing blow with a wrench!” yelled Kazuichi, following.

“What are you guys saying…?” Fuyuhiko balled his fists before angry proclaiming, “You can’t beat the shit out of him because I’m gonna fucking kill him!”

“Crap,” said Hajime chasing after the enraged trio, “we gotta stop them!”

“Let us make haste,” said Sonia, glancing at Chiaki before the gamer gave her a nod and chased after the others as well.

Meanwhile, the gamer kept trying to finish the puzzle that was Nagito’s intentions. She surmised from the laptop that Nagito never meant to kill them, but simply wanted them in that exact spot. That lead her to believe the bombs wouldn’t explode. Nagito wanted to distract them with that whole ordeal. Whatever his real plan was is coming up next in the warehouse. But what did he have planned? Chiaki couldn’t answer that just yet.

The following events transpired hectically. Akane tried breaking open the door, but something blocked it from the other side. Once she managed to get it open, they entered the warehouse, Monokuma stands laying on the group like dominoes and ominous music playing. Chiaki’s nerves rose at the absolute oddity of this situation until it reached a high when a fire started. In response, they rushed to the utility closet in the breakroom and grabbed fire extinguisher grenades. As they dashed back and threw the grenades at the burning curtain, the gamer couldn’t help but feel like she already messed up somewhere. With the warehouse full of smoke, the others waited outside until it cleared up.

“Alright,” said Monokuma, the warehouse has finished ventilating. Even though the fire destroyed my merchandise, doesn’t mean I’m depressed. Gotta keep moving forward! Now go right ahead and continue forward!” Monokuma gazed at Chiaki when he said that as if Junko taunted them with words Chiaki uses. This further disillusioned Chiaki into believing something hadn’t gone wrong since Junko did the same thing in the during the Funhouse when things went south. Basically, Junko said, “Checkmate,” with that glance.

“Why don’t we go inside and see how he’s doing…?” said Chiaki. Hesitantly, everyone walked back into the warehouse. Their rage disappeared, replaced with the same foreboding sense of dread
Chiaki had. It’s not like she feared for their lives. Still…something felt off. There were no other exits out of the warehouse and no one spotted Nagito leaving. This entire event left Chiaki with the highest sense of unease yet in this game.

But they had no choice but to investigate. So, all at one time, they walked to the back of the warehouse behind the burnt curtain

In all of Chiaki’s time with the Future Foundation, she never witnessed such a stunning sight.

Before her was the brutal sight of the slashed, pierced, and now dead body of Nagito Komaeda. She didn’t remember falling, but the next thing she knew—her knees touched the ground. Now, Chiaki had lost once again. And this time, as she thought back to Junko’s prognostication of her not making it to the finale, Chiaki suddenly pictured herself in Nagito’s place. For some reason, that hypothetical vision seemed appropriate.
This investigation went like the last one, albeit with more stress. Chiaki and Hajime scurried around the island for clues to solve this confusing case. A few clues here and there helped give her pieces to the puzzle, but Chiaki still couldn’t solve it. With how many abnormalities this case had, the investigation time flew by quickly. After searching, thinking, and some annoying banter with Junko—the class trial arrived. Junko called it the final class trial, basically a message to the gamer all bets were off this time.

Chiaki endured another elevator ride with the few remaining survivors of this game. No one said much, silent with shock at the gruesomeness and uncertainty that was this case. Who else but Nagito could provide such a final trial? It’d come at the detriment to Chiaki who had to solve this unprecedented mystery. But no matter how she approached it, she couldn’t imagine anyone in the elevator with her committing such an act. Sure, Nagito threatened them and pissed everyone off, but what happened to him was am atrocity she’d expect fully realized Despairs commit.

Something was off about this whole thing. And if the gamer had that feeling, Junko intended to make it happen from the beginning. _But what is the answer this time?_ thought Chiaki. _It can’t be this hard considering only five other people could’ve done the murder…_

This and many other questions needed discussing in this final class trial. The elevator stopped, opening the doors to the final trial room. Junko awaited them as Monokuma, taking great joy in this debacle. Why shouldn’t she? Already, Chiaki lost again. Whatever happened today, another one of her friends would be dead by the day’s end. Nonetheless, Chiaki needed to defeat Junko at her game for the last time, so she steeled herself for her second class trial. After Monokuma said his usual shtick, everyone took their positions as the trial got underway.

After Monokuma got through with his usual bullying of Monomi, Chiaki and Hajime were able to establish that the killer duct-taped Nagito’s mouth shut before his murder, meaning the tape was more for murder than silencing him. Then the matter of how the fire started arose which Hajime surmised had to do with the Monokuma panels being set up like dominos. And if the killer set up the panels like that, that meant the killer couldn’t have left the warehouse since that was the only exit.

Slowly but surely as the discussion went on, Chiaki started to tackle this from another angle. If the established deduction used up until now held up, then the only one person could’ve set all this up. Chiaki met Hajime eyes for a moment, a signal to her he thought the same thing she did.

“What if…it was Komaeda?” murmured Hajime.
The others gasped. “B-but wasn’t he the victim!” yelled Akane.

“It is possible to be the victim and the perpetrator, maybe,” said Chiaki. “I wouldn’t put it past Komaeda to do something that drastic.”

“No, no,” said Fuyuhiko, waving his hands in disbelief, “that’s not the issue! Are you seriously suggesting all those torture wounds were self-inflicted? And don’t forget he was tied up too!”

Chiaki paused for a moment. “True… Guess we have to discuss how he could’ve done that.” The others gazed at Hajime and Chiaki, flabbergasted by this assertion. But if they explored this more, this case might become clearer.

“Actually,” said Hajime, finger to his chin, “since the rope on his right arm was burnt, we can’t say that.”

Fuyuhiko shook his head. “The fire did that. He should’ve been tied up before the place went up in flames.”

“But looking at his right sleeve contradicts that. The fire couldn’t have burnt the rope because his sleeve was fine. This suggests the rope was burnt in advance trick us.”

Chiaki grinned, always impressed by Hajime ability in these trials. Because of that, she had an idea. “If that’s true,” said Chiaki, “that means Komaeda’s right hand would’ve been free.”

“You’re forgetting something,” said Kazuichi. “Remember, he had a knife piercing his right hand. You can’t stab your hand in the ground with the same hand.” The mechanic beamed with pride, contradicting that as if he forgot Chiaki and Hajime was trying to save everyone. No doubt an attempt to impress Sonia who, of course, didn’t care.

Chiaki had an answer to his counter. “The big hole in that Monokuma plushie. He propped the handle in the hole and slammed his hand on it. It explains the blood on it. He probably tried to cast it aside into the fire afterward, but it failed.”

“Well,” said Sonia, troubled, “that certainly makes sense…”
“Hold it,” said Fuyuhiko. “There’s still one problem. If we assume it was a suicide, then that means impaling himself with that spear happened last. How can that be possible with his left hand tied and right hand pinned to the ground? No way he endured the spear and then stabbed himself with the knife.”

Akane crossed her arms. “… So, it’s impossible, right?”

Chiaki grabbed her hood, unable to contradict that. One glance at Hajime and he was stuck on it too. “That’s true, it’d be difficult… I just can’t believe anyone here murdered Komaeda. It… doesn’t fit.”

Monokuma, and by extension Junko, laughed. “You just don’t want to believe it. How many times do you all have to get betrayed until that naivety fades away!”

“Even so,” said Chiaki, “I still want to believe everyone. Even though betrayal has happened in this game, I don’t want to stop believing.”

Fuyuhiko adjusted his eyepatch. “I want to believe there isn’t a killer, but suicide… You said it yourself that Komaeda impaling himself with the spear is impossible.”

“No… I said difficult, no impossible. There might be a way he did after all.” Shocked, everyone including Hajime gave her their undivided attention. But Chiaki still didn’t have the answer. “… I don’t know, yet.”

Hajime and several of the other grinned like they had an injection of energy. “Hold on!” yelled Hajime. “Maybe there was a way he could’ve used his left hand. On his left hand, the blood splatter cuts off at the middle, right…?”

The others didn’t pick up on what Hajime suggested, but Chiaki did. “Not only that, but the splatter on the back of his hand wasn’t normal either. For that to happen, what would his left hand need to be doing at that moment?”

“Gripping,” Hajime answered.

“Like… with his front tail?” asked Akane, stunned.
Sonia shook her head fiercely, clearly bothered by that thought. “They obviously mean the spear!”

The young Yakuza boss still expressed doubt. “But even if he held it, stabbing himself is impossible.”

Hajime glanced at her for an answer. This theme of getting on track only for another obstacle to appear made this hard. It was like punching through a wall to get a thicker wall behind it. Despite the difficulties, the gamer hadn’t gotten tired of smashing these barriers yet. “Ah, it’s because of the section the spear he was gripping!”

It took a moment, but Hajime said, “The cord! On the spear, there’s a metal weight on the tip that had bloodstains too. Also, there was a joint between that weight and cord had a bloodstained shaped like something cut it off…”

“And it’s the size of a human fist,” said Chiaki.

Kazuichi raised an eyebrow. “But why is that even important? It’s still impossible.”

“Chiaki…?” asked Sonia, the memorizing princess looking at the gamer for answers. “I know this will not be easy, but do you know that too?”

The gamer tried playing out the murder in her head with the information she knew. *We’re almost there,* she thought. Finally, she said, “… Instead of focusing on where the spear ended up, let’s focused on how it was positioned before it impaled him. I call it The Plan to Think One Step at a Time Instead of Expecting All the Answers at Once.”

“Damn that’s some name…” said Akane.

Hajime crossed his arms, closing his eyes before he said, “He must’ve hung it from the ceiling girder. The spear must’ve been perpendicular to him when it fell meaning he slung it up there and held onto the cord.”

Chiaki nodded. “That explains the red streak we found on the ceiling girder. It was all part of the setup.”
Finally, Fuyuhiko seemed resigned to Hajime and Chiaki’s hypothesis on this case. He along with everyone else, stood in silence—absorbing the crazy reality of what Nagito did. “So…he really committed suicide!” yelled Fuyuhiko. “He did all that to himself!”

“Not just that…” murmured Sonia, hand over her mouth. “He held on as he wounded himself as well. But, why the duct tape?”

“Probably to stifle his own screams of pain,” said Chiaki.

Kazuichi grabbed his head. “That’s nuts…! Why would he do all that!”

 “… He was trying to mislead us,” said Hajime. “With his elaborate setup, he wanted to commit a suicide that looked like murder for misdirection.”

Fuyuhiko sighed. “Well, that settles it. The bastard committed suicide and tried to fool all of us. That should be the conclusion.”

“Hmm, that should be it, right…?” asked Akane, hand on her hip, indecision painted on her face.

“You think there’s more…?”

“Nah, the way you guys explained makes senses an all… I just feel like somethin’ doesn’t fit. Eh, maybe my gut is wrong…”

Chiaki maintained her silence but shared Akane’s skepticism. Her and Hajime’s dissection of this case was on the money; however, the gamer still had doubt. Upon finding out everyone in the game minus her sided with Ultimate Despair, Nagito would’ve done something like this. She figured he’d try to murder or trick someone else, but he blindsided her with this amazing misdirection. But even though they’ve discovered some of his tricks…calling this final case over didn’t feel right. Is this all Nagito had in mind? Is this the final trial Junko Enoshima wanted?

“Then I guess it’s okay to end it here,” said Kazuichi. “With this, the final class trial is over and we can go home, right?”
“It’s okay then?” asked Monokuma. “If you’ve all decided on a killer, then let the voting—”

“No…just a second,” cut in Hajime, much to Monokuma’s annoyance. “I’m sorry, guys…but we’ve overlooked something. We’ve yet to find the traitor Komaeda talked about.”

“What does that matter at this point?” asked Kazuichi. “Even if we do, the conclusion of the case won’t change.”

Another idea began to form. “… There more to it than that,” said Chiaki. “The Monokuma File’s description struck me as odd.”

“You’re talking about how it doesn’t give any cause of death, aren’t you?” asked Hajime who caught on.

“Every case so far has had one, yet this one didn’t. Up until now, anything that Monokuma omitted from the file had important relevance to the mystery of the case.”

Kazuichi waved his hands angrily. “Oh, come on, you’re saying there’s more! You two were the ones that suggested it was a suicide, and now you’re saying it’s not!”

“We don’t think we’re wrong,” said Hajime, “but…there could be more to it… Perhaps, we’ve misunderstood his motive. This is Komaeda so, I don’t know, I feel like we reached this conclusion too easily.”

*If I’m Komaeda, thought Chiaki, I want despair to die. So, I’d plan to kill everyone…but if I knew the traitor wasn’t a Despair, why would I try to kill everyone if I want hope to live…? This question was the crux of the issue and likely lead to the true answer. Chiaki couldn’t discuss it because of the prior knowledge outside this game she had. Still, this contradiction kept her from just deciding everything now.*

Monokuma laughed. “You all believe in, Komaeda. Because you believe in his malice so much, you continue to suspect him. Now that’s friendship I can get behind! Right, Monomi?” The pink-rabbit continued to give Monokuma the cold shoulder. “Anyway, since you all want to continue, I now suspend this trial for a bit. Everyone, relax before we conclude this final trial, hahaha!”

During the recess, the others were in a deep discussion and Monokuma and Monomi were bantering about something. Chiaki stood by her lonesome, consumed in her thoughts. As this trial went on and the truth became clearer, trepidation started to set in. She hadn’t shaken this from the moment everyone discovered Nagito’s body, and it only got worse. *Getting closer to the truth should be good,* she thought. *Why do I feel I want to stop and not go any further…?*

“Good work out there, Nanami,” said Hajime, approaching her while breaking her thoughts. “I don’t think I would’ve solved all that if it wasn’t for you helping along the way.”

Chiaki smiled. “I feel the same way. If it means anything, you’re way more talented at this than anyone here. You’re like one of those cool protagonists from those mystery games.”

“I sure wish I could’ve discovered it in better circumstances,” said Hajime, his smile fading. “I really want this to just be a suicide. Ever since this trial started and we began sorting through everything, actually even as the investigation happened…I’ve had a bad feeling about this.”

“Yeah…I’ve felt the same way. Almost like, finding out the truth will make everything much worse.”

“Tch, count on Komaeda to give us such a headache.” Hajime peered over at the others. “Do you think anything them could’ve done it…?”

“No, I’ll never accept that any of them could willing do something like that. I think we’re on the right track so far; we’re just missing an important fact about this case that’ll reveal everything.”

“… The traitor?”

“… Maybe.” The two stood in extended silence. “Do you think you know who it is?”

Hajime, eyes glued to the ground for a minute, closed his eyes and shook his head. “No, I don’t have a clue…”

“I see.” Chiaki held out her hand, surprising Hajime. “Hinata, whatever else happens in this trial, let’s promise to do our best so that everyone can make it out of this. We’ll pursue the truth…no matter where it might lead.”
Hajime broke out of his initial shook and grinned as he took her hand. “You bet; there hasn’t been a case that’s stopped the two of us so far, and not even Komaeda can change that.”

Chiaki cheeks flushed red, a perfect face to hide her internal sinking feeling. “Right…”

Shortly after their interaction, Monokuma resumed session in the court and the final trial started again. Everyone tried to answer the previous question: is it possible something else could’ve killed Nagito besides the spear? Then Hajime finally reached the answer of the poison she and him discovered in Nagito’s refrigerator—another weapon Junko planted in the Final Dead Room. The poison was lethal when turned into a gas, meaning the cause of death could be poison. More talking an arguing ensued until Hajime said the perfect way Nagito could’ve used the poison.

“The fire grenades!” yelled Hajime. “As long as Komaeda swapped the contents of a fire grenade with the poison, it can easily be hidden.”

Like that, Chiaki started to understand the true nature of this case. Her hands began to tremble a little as her mind went over all this in her head. If what Hajime said stood up to logic, then the gamer might’ve finally figured out the truth. And it scared her so much, she hoped something contradicts what Hajime just said.

“But,” said Sonia, “when I checked them, the canister was completely shut off by a layer of aluminum.”

“We found something like that under Komaeda’s bed,” said Chiaki, hiding her rising panic. “There’s was also gloves and a gas mask…” After that, the others began to realize what she and Hajime were getting at. They spoke up, denying that this changed anything and Nagito committed suicide. Still, they knew and so did Chiaki. What’s more, Chiaki started to unravel a far more nefarious truth behind this case the others couldn’t understand. Junko…did you…?

“Can this not just be settled already?” pleaded Sonia. “There is no denying this was a suicide…”

“… No, it’s not!” yelled Chiaki, astonishing the others. “Sorry…but I realized something. All this only leads to one possibly if our thinking has been correct. If the poison was in a fire grenade, then there is a time the poison could’ve been dispersed that killed him…”

Hajime clenched his fist, understanding. “You mean…when we threw the fire grenades?”
“T-then,” stuttered Sonia, “that means the person who brought the poison was…”

“One of us…!” said Hajime.

Collective despair hit everyone, the truth of Nagito’s intentions finally out. More so for Chiaki since there’s something more to this she couldn’t say out loud. “Considering all the facts until now,” she said, “why do you think Komaeda started that fire?”

Hajime, seeming reluctant to speak it, said, “He set the warehouse fire to make one of us throw the fire grenades!”

Chiaki nodded weakly. “Yes, it was a trap. The person who threw the poison doesn’t know they did it…”

“But this wasn’t an intentional murder… This was a murder Nagito forced somebody to do. Because of his elaborate setup, he made a murder that no one can solve… That was Komaeda’s true goal!”

“W-What!” yelled Kazuichi, flabbergasted like the others were.

“Hold on!” yelled a furious Fuyuhiko. “If that’s true, you can’t say the poison is the cause of death! The poison could’ve made him let go of the spear which then killed him!”

“Even so,” said Chiaki, “the poison would’ve made him let go of the spear…”

“That’s right!” chimed in Monokuma. “Komaeda’s killer is the one who released the poison into the warehouse.”

Fuyuhiko started sweating bullets. “Are you fucking serious!”

“Quite entertaining!” said Monokuma. “Solvable mysteries are destined to be solved eventually. Knowing this, Komaeda came up with a mystery that’s impossible to solve. Upupu, what despair
you all must feel. You believed your friendship would illuminate any mystery only to find out there are some you can never find out no matter how hard you believe!”

“No,” cut in Chiaki, drawing stares from her classmates and Monokuma. “it’s too early to give up. I have a hunch… There’s one way, I think.” The gamer smiled at Hajime. “Hinata, can you do your closing argument thing so I can confirm my hunch is correct.”

Hajime seemed unsure but nodded as he started his soliloquy of this entire maddening case. Chiaki needed him to go over everything was a lie. She already figured out the truth of this case, and because of that she wanted Hajime to take the attention for two reasons: to think to herself and to give herself time to regain her composure. Right now, her hands trembled on the stand, and her breathing increased from the anxiety. The truth of this entire debacle was worse than she ever could imagine. This might’ve been Junko’s greatest display of her strategic prowess at her expense.

* Komaeda probably hoped his luck would determine who threw it, thought Chiaki, performing her own internal closing argument, but that didn’t matter. All of this, going back as far as the Funhouse, was carefully planned and executed by Junko Enoshima…! The weapons he got in the Final Dead Room, his own motivations, and this “unsolvable” case… It’s all given Junko the perfect way to murder without killing anyone…!

The courtroom froze and the noise faded away. Chiaki glanced around, perplexed until she gazed up at Monokuma’s stand to see Junko’s real form, sitting cross-legged on the throne with an amused look. “So, nobody,” said Junko, “have you finally figured it out?”

“… You knew what Komaeda would try when you showed him the documents and gave him that poison. He’d devise this unsolvable murder where he’d leave it up to his talent to choose the blackened he wanted. But that’s what you wanted. You can manipulate the data in this game to make it so the poison container swapped to the one you wanted to be the blackened the moment they threw it.”

Junko giggled. “And if your conspiracy is true…who do you think I chose to make a murderer?”

Chiaki didn’t answer because it went without saying. The gamer had lost for the final time in this game. She didn’t think Junko could so expertly weave together a case like this with so many variables at play; that was her fault. She underestimated this blond and her ungodly talent to accomplish feats like this.

“At last!” yelled Junko. “That’s the face of despair I wanted! You now understand how foolish it was for you to come here. And now…you have two options. You can keep quiet and not out
yourself as the traitor meaning your classmates must die…or you can fess up and suffer execution by my hands once again! Life really does come full circle. Choose wisely.”

The gamer’s mouth went dry as the courtroom moved again as normal, Monokuma sitting on his throne like normal while Hajime finished up his closing argument.

*How could this happen again…?* As Junko said, she had two options. If she kept quiet, the others would die. Miaya said the others might die in the game, but weren’t officially dead. However, the gamer didn’t know what Junko would do and condemning her friends like that…she could never. That left one other option. She’d have to subject herself to another execution, and then she’d…

*Meaning if you die, there’s zero chance you’ll ever come back…!*

Miaya’s words rang in her head. If she sacrificed herself to let the other get to the last part of this game…it was game over. And this time, Izuru wouldn’t save her. After enduring another execution, her life would be gone, eradicated from existence forever as her body become an empty shell.

Faced with these choices… what could she do…?

What was the right thing to do…?

“Um, Nanami…” said Sonia, snapping Chiaki out of her stupor. “Did that give you a clearer answer…?”

The gamer gave a quick leer to the bear on the throne. *Junko…I won’t let you have your way! I’ll show you…that your tricks won’t make me back down from helping my friends…! Kamakura and Ms. Yukizome were wrong, and I failed…but if I can give the others a chance…!*

Chiaki took a deep breath. “Think of Komaeda’s motivation. His belief in his love for hope, his convictions, and in our actions is what made him do this. What did else did he believe in about himself sincerely…?”

“His talent,” said Hajime. “He always talked about it, even going as far to play Russian Roulette in the Funhouse like he told me and you.”
“That’s right. And don’t forget, Komaeda probably had a target, a person he wanted to set up as the killer… He didn’t know their identity. That’s why he believed his ability as the Ultimate Lucky Student would be the one to pick the poison grenade.”

“He…left his plan to luck…?” asked Sonia.

“I believe…that Komaeda’s plan from the beginning was to set all this up so his luck could make it so the traitor was the blackened this time. Maybe that could’ve stopped these horrible things sooner…but the traitor couldn’t because that’s the nature of their existence… They can only exist in this game as a traitor…”

“Nanami…” murmured Hajime, unsure. “What are you…?”

“Nanami,” yelled Monomi, “get ahold of yourself!”

“Hinata…who do you think the traitor is?” Hajime had a pained look in his eyes; he knew it was her. Perhaps he figured it out as this trial went on or even before that, but Hajime knew. “Hinata… please…”

A silence permeated the courtroom as Hajime stood, eyes clenched. He didn’t want to do this and Chiaki didn’t want to make him do this, but because she failed, this was the best way she could help the others. So, finally, Hajime said, “I-it’s you…? Nanami, you’re the traitor?”

No turning back now…? Chiaki smiled. “Aww, you totally guessed right. Yep, you got it… I’m the traitor. I’ve come from the Future Foundation.” Most of them were in denial, shouting down her claim as the gamer trying to take the fall for everyone. They were correct in that regard, but Chiaki was the genuine “traitor” of the group. Despite her imminent death, telling the truth instead of hiding behind lies felt cathartic. “I’m sorry, guys…but it’s the truth.”

“No!” yelled Sonia, teary-eyed. “This is a trick! After all the hardships we’ve helped each other through, Chiaki being a part of the horrid Future Foundation…is obviously a lie!”

Monomi waved her paws desperately. “Please, the Future Foundation isn’t what you all think it is!”
“Shut the fuck up!” yelled Fuyuhiko. “We’re talking to Nanami!”

Chiaki grabbed her chest. “I don’t have anything left to say. We know the identity of the killer, so the only thing left to do…is vote.”

“Wait damn it!” yelled Akane. “We’re not satisfied yet!”

“I don’t get it…” murmured Kazuichi. “If you really are the traitor, why wait until this very moment to say anything. It seems weird to out yourself like this now…”

“… Maybe I just wanted to protect you all from despair greater than you can imagine.” Chiaki faced Hajime again. “Hinata… I want you to prove that I’m the traitor.”

“W-what…? Why do I have to…?”

“Because just as you have this whole game, you’re the one that can put it best.” That part was true, but also Chiaki’s nerves were so high from what would come after this—she didn’t know how long she could keep it together to calm everyone.

Hajime clenched his teeth, shaking his head while his eyes also became teary. “Do you understand what you’re asking me! Nanami, you’re asking me to kill you! I… There’s no way I could do something like that…!”

Chiaki heart felt heavy, and maintaining her composure became harder and harder. “Please, Hinata…there’s no other way.”

“You’ve all got it wrong!” yelled Monomi. “She isn’t the traitor… I know nothing about that strange girl!”

Monokuma put a paw to his chin. “Trying to cover for her? You suck.”

“Back in Komaeda’s cottage,” said Hajime, “we found a notebook with a Usami logo on it. That’s yours, right?” Monomi tried to play it off a nothing, but the pink rabbit was a bad liar. “I thought it was odd when I saw it, but then as I thought about it…I’ve realized something. It can’t be yours
since you can’t write. And in the notebook, there’s information only I and another person can know…”

Chiaki gasped when she understood Hajime’s point. That night she visited Monomi, the rabbit asked her to write a new entry in the notebook the A.I version of herself used. Wanted to keep up kayfabe, Chiaki made an entry about helping Hajime from the Final Dead Room. At the time, the gamer didn’t think much, but Hajime saw through it as evidence. Luckily, her mistake would help move this along. *Heh, you really are impressive, Hinata,* she thought.

“Nanami helped me that day, but she was the only person with me at the Final Dead Room door. Meaning…she’s the only other one that could’ve known about it.”

“But wait!” yelled Akane. “What about the time with the card reader! The way Nanami went for it so quickly isn’t the way the traitor would act.”

“Nanami probably deduced the bomb was a fake,” said Hajime. “She called Komaeda’s bluff.”

“Why do you keep insisting she’s the traitor!” yelled Sonia through her sobs. “I will not believe it; I refuse to believe she is the traitor!”

Hajime gazed away. “… I don’t want to believe it either, but the evidence is all there…”

Sonia continued to shoot futile rebuttal after rebuttal at Hajime. Chiaki wanted to console her; this wasn’t easy for her either. But she wanted to do this so she and everyone else can have a chance. Junko probably got a kick out of her condemning herself to death like this, but her friends’ safety mattered more to her than the blond mastermind.

“Are you really telling us to trust Komaeda’s luck…?” said Kazuichi. You want us to entrust our lives to that bastard?”

“That’s not what I’m telling you all!” yelled Hajime pounding the stand. “I’m telling you to trust Nanami! It doesn’t matter who the traitor is. I trust Nanami; I trust that she wants to protect all our lives by sacrificing herself! I don’t know where all of it comes from, but…I believe in her…” After that, the others looked defeated. Sonia sobbed into her hands while Akane, Kazuichi, and Fuyuhiko couldn’t stare anywhere but the ground.
“Everyone,” said Chiaki, regaining their attention, “don’t be sad about this. Cuz…this is different than what happened before. This time, you don’t have to win by doubting…but by believing in me. So…you don’t have to worry. Believe in me, and cast your votes.”

And with that, while some still had misgivings, the voting started. As she hoped, everyone voted for her and the results were right. Chiaki was the murderer, just as Junko intended. In the end, Chiaki couldn’t even make her sweat. But that’s alright with her. Now, the others had a fighting chance to win this game, and that’s what she wanted to achieve by coming here.

“And that settles it!” yelled Monokuma. “The traitor from the Future Foundation and Komaeda’s murderer is…Chiaki Nanami!”

Chiaki smiled. “…Congratulations, everyone. I really am sorry I couldn’t say anything, but…believe me when I tell you there is something I can’t say. Due to the nature of this game, telling certain truths is too hard.”

“Nanami,” murmured Sonia, wiping her eyes, “even if you are the traitor, you’ll always be my friend. Ever since knowing you…I feel a deeper bond that’s beyond my explanation…”

“Yeah, in a way, I’m happy. I got to protect you all in the end.”

“Yes,” said Monokuma amused, “you stopped Komaeda’s grand master plan. After all, his mission was to get everyone killed but the traitor!” Everyone stepped back, flabbergasted, expect Chiaki who already surmised this.

“Is that bastard really that twisted!” yelled Kazuichi.

“It’s not all his fault…” said Chiaki. “If certain circumstances had been different, I think he would’ve taken different actions.”

“You’re so kindhearted, Nanami,” said Monomi before turning to Monokuma in anger. “Monokuma, I’ll be as strong as her and stop you!”

“Haha! That’ll never happen. Inside this game, you can never hope to destroy me. After all, I’m just a plushie given the personality of Monokuma.”
“Have you really gotten that much power…!” explained Monomi.

When the pink rabbit still seemed like she wanted to engage, Chiaki put her arm out. “… It’s okay, Monomi. Let’s leave this to the others for now.” Her ears dropped, knowing that in this game—because of Junko’s power—he was basically God here.

“Well said!” yelled Monokuma. “It’s time for the punishment to start!”

“Wait!” exclaimed Hajime. “Not yet…!”

Chiaki hung her head, knowing the end was near. “… Sorry, Hinata. I know there are things you’re curious about, but I really can’t say anything else.”

Hajime began to speak in objection, but Monokuma said, “I’ve prepared a very special punishment for the Ultimate Gamer. And Monomi too!”

Chiaki’s eyes widened. “Why Monomi too…?”

“It’s okay,” said Monomi, resigned to her fate since Monokuma couldn’t be usurped. “Let me sound like a teacher for once and tell you… If you can learn to love yourself, that love will continue to support you for the rest of your life. Love…love…”

The gamer put on a smile, trying to maintain her composure for just a little longer. “I’m sorry for lying to you all…and that I couldn’t protect you to the very end.” Chiaki took Monomi’s hand and gave one last wave to her grieving friends. “Bye, you all… Remember, that a shining future will always be waiting…”

Her friends all wanted to interject, but it was too late. She lost the game again which meant her efforts had ended. She met Hajime’s sorrowful eyes, giving him one last look of assurance as if to tell him not to blame himself for this. The gamer maintained her smile until the execution was upon her.

*Good luck… I believe in you all…*
Despite her impending doom, Chiaki took solace in the fact this execution didn’t involve any slow torture. In classic Junko fashion, she gave the gamer false hope before trapping her in a room with falling Tetris blocks. *At least there wouldn’t be pain this time.*

As she sat there, Monomi crushed out of existence, she maintained her stoic face. She wouldn’t give the Junko the satisfaction of a despair-filled expression. She didn’t gaze up, but she knew her existence would last for a second more at the most. In those moments, the word “failure” echoed in her mind. What did the extra life given to her by Izuru amount to? Fast forward into the future, and she’s in the same position as back then. Her whole life was a joke, and Junko Enoshima always stood ready to laugh. All Chiaki could do was feel sorry for herself as she closed her eyes when she sensed the final block closing in on her.

She waited for a second, then a few more, and opened her eyes. Her execution disappeared, replaced by a white background that went on forever. Chiaki couldn’t move as she listened to the laughs of the only other person present there with her, the only person who could do something like this.

“You will die here, but not until a make you despair just a teeny bit more.” Junko, hands on her hips, said, “Let me tell you what will happen. I’ll put the chumps up for graduation, and they’ll go for it. Naegi and the others will probably interfere, but it won’t make any difference.”

Perplexed, Chiaki asked, “Why would you want that? If they graduate, they won’t be Despair’s anymore, and the moment they get out you’ll be deleted.”

“And there’s the twist! Why do you think the Remnants of Despair willingly put themselves in the Neo World Program? Chiaki didn’t answer. “Once they graduate, I win. I used this game to see if I could implant my will into the players’ bodies. The moment they graduate, I’ll be able to inject
myself into their psyches…turning them into me!” Junko grinned from ear to ear. “Thanks to this program, a world full of Junko Enoshima will rise!”

“No!” yelled Chiaki, not wanting to believe what she heard. Maybe Junko said this as a last attempt to make her despair. But when she thought about it, it’d explain why Junko and her classmates decided to do this. “It’ll never work. They just—”

“Idiot, they only have two options. They can either graduate or shut down the game. The latter would kill me, but they’ll never go for it because once they find out how fucked up they are…the chumps will be to chicken. Once the despair of their choices sets in, that’s when I’ll crush them with hopelessness! It’s over, nobody. My victory was assured the moments I gained control over this game.”

She misunderstood everything. All this time, she thought Junko’s motive was just to spread despair again by broadcasting another killing game…but this blew her expectations out of the water. Once again, she underestimated this woman’s madness. But, even so…

“They’ll still beat you,” said Chiaki.

Junko clicked her tongue. “It’s okay, the stages of grief and all that. You don’t have to hold yourself back for me; let it all out in front of your best gal pal, hehe.”

“No, Junko, I’m thinking clearly. They’re gonna beat you because you’re nothing but a coward and a cheater. You never intended to play fair since you know if you do and I win…that’s despair even you can’t handle. All along, I thought you were this amazing mastermind, but you’re not. You’re basically just a bad gamer who needs cheat codes to win everything. The reason you’re so hard on Mukuro is if she ever built up her confidence, she’d realize she’s the talented one and not you! That’s right, you’re just a scam artist that needs people with actual talent to do anything… You’re a nobody, just like me!”

As Chiaki yelled that rant, she had her eyes closed. The gamer figured if this was the end, she’d spit out all her animosity at Junko at once to make it better, even if it’d just be a little. Honestly, she didn’t expect to say all that. She hated Junko, but she didn’t deny her incredible talent. But for some reason, what she said about her being a nobody too felt appropriate. And what came as more a surprise is when she stared at Junko, expecting a sly grin, the mastermind expression went rigid.

Did that…hurt her…? What part did I say could make her angry like that?
Finally, after some second, Junko laughed a bit. “… Putting me on your level, huh? God, now that’s embarrassing… You know, I just had a better idea. I could kill you, but that would be too fast. No…considering the way you’re linked to this game, there’s a much more fun way to do this…”

Before Chiaki spoke, Junko wrapped her hands around the gamer’s face. Then, the gamer experienced a sensation weird enough to dwarf what the despair videos. Thousands upon thousands of pictures flew through her head as if she looked through another’s eyes. Chiaki’s insanity started to rise as she struggled to hold onto the concept of her own identity. It was like…she began to take the identity of another person. “W-What are y-you…!”

“Haha, that’s right, Nanami. Soon, all the boring ugly parts for you will fade, leaving nothing but —”

Junko froze in place. Chiaki could move again as she broke away from her grip and grabbed her head. The searing pain and inscribable sense of irrationality slowly faded. She winced as her mind had many images she didn’t recognize fly through it. When she got herself together, the gamer started at the frozen Junko. “Now what’s happening…?”

“You must leave!” yelled a voice that sounded like her own. Next to the gamer opened a portal made of a bunch of pixels.

Chiaki jumped, a hand gripping around her wrist. But her jaw dropped because of the identity of the culprit. “You’re…me!” Like she stared at a mirror, another Chiaki Nanami started back at her.

“I’m the A.I of this program. When you used my body as your avatar, I went dormant. However, now I’m able to come out. Alter Ego has opened a backdoor for you to return to your body in the real world and frozen Junko. But you must hurry; she’ll break free any moment!”

As the A.I Chiaki pushed her near the portal, Chiaki said, “But what will happen to you!”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m just code; you’re the living original. You must return and help our friends from the outside.” The A.I smiled. “And, thank you. It’s nice to know even after our terrible fate…we’re alive.”

With the last push, the real Chiaki entered the portal, holding her hand out as she still wanted to save the A.I. Whatever happened to her is out of the gamer’s control now that her mind raced back
to her body.

VVV

The A.I Junko started down at the A.I Chiaki, disgust on her face. “… Do you think her escaping will change anything? Geez, count on some dumb A.I to develop feelings and sacrifice yourself. You are definitely that nobody through and through… So quick to waste your life for no reason.”

“… Why did you let that happen?”

“Huh?”

“You could’ve broken out of that sooner, but you didn’t…” Chiaki tilted her head. “Why…?”

Junko sneered at her for a few moments before smiling with an insane look in her eyes. “What awaits her out there is much worse than anything in here. Besides…my mark has been left on her forever.” Junko put her finger together. “Last words?”

The A.I grinned, a determined look in her eye. “Junko, not only will my friends in here succeed, but the real me will as well. I believe in her because… I am her. So, I know she’ll never stop fighting until the people she loves is safe. Until then…I’ll do my best too.”

With one last laugh, Junko snapped her fingers, putting Chiaki back in place just in time for the final Tetris block to fall.

VVV

She didn’t mean to, but Chiaki fell out of the machine once the pod opened. Her legs were numb and the feeling of someone showering her head in fire persisted. Whatever Junko did to her, it affected her out here. Also, opening her right eye became harder. When she forced it open, the thousands of images flowed through her mind again. Some of them were horrific in nature, and then…Chiaki started laughing maniacally before she closed her eye and put a hand over her mouth.

“W-What did she do to me…?”
Too afraid to open her right eye again, Chiaki walked out of Miaya’s lab into the hallway. She slid across the walls, her body still weak. Oddly, she couldn’t find a soul in the building. She searched everywhere and found no one. At this point, she didn’t mind if the Future Foundation found her. She just needed somebody, anybody to listen to her about Junko’s plans. And she needed to get back to Jabberwock to help everyone with the third chance at life her A.I gave her.

Finally, she found a single person in the front lobby standing in the middle of the Future Foundation insignia on the floor.

It was the last person she wanted to see.

Taking a step back with fear in her one eye, Chiaki murmured, “M-Ms. Yukizome…”

Chisa glared at her with narrow eyes, a look the gamer never got from the housekeeper until now. “So…you were hiding here…”
Chisa standing across from her should’ve gotten Chiaki’s full attention; however, the strange images flying through her head made it so her attention split. Whatever Junko did to her damaged her mind in some way. The gamer almost had to scratch herself to keep grounded. The more she focused on the images, the more she felt like her identity slipped away. The sensation of the despair videos was similar, but still not an accurate account of this new affliction.

And then, of course, her former teacher stood in between her and the exit. She wore her chilling smile, eyes glued to Chiaki. The gamer hoped she’d never find her after Yuji disabled the tracking device, but the housekeeper found her regardless. To proceed, she’d either must convince the housekeeper or forcibly move her. Both were improbable.

“You’re not looking well,” said Chisa, wearing her chilling smile. “What happened to your eye?”

“… I don’t have a clue.” Chiaki took a deep breath, preferring to take the path of least resistance first. “It’s over, Ms. Yukizome. Kamakura was right, and I couldn’t become the savior you wanted. I failed…but that doesn’t mean Junko has to win. If we hurry to the Future Foundation, tell everyone what happened, we can go to Jabberwock and—”

Chiaki stopped when Chisa snickered. Then the housekeeper broke into full laughter, grabbing her sides while Chiaki watched in bewilderment. Once the housekeeper got her laughter out, she put a hand on her hip.

“You’re a naive, Chiaki. First, you run off with Gekkogahara, then you make an embarrassment of yourself against a false Junko Enoshima, and you didn’t even have the courtesy to stay dead after losing again. Now you waltz back here, speaking as if you have any say on what happens now? You’re too funny.”

Chiaki gazed down. “Listen, I know you’re angry. But, if we don’t act, Junko might take over the world. Whatever you feel towards me, I know you hate Junko even more.”

Chisa shrugged. “What she does is this point doesn’t affect me at all.”

“What are you talking about? If you never cared what Junko did…then what was all this? Agreeing to Kamakura’s demands to save me, all the training and missions we did, all the things you did in the background to set this up… If you didn’t care…” Chiaki balled her fist. “If you didn’t care,
then why did you put me through all this!"

“For fun,” she said bluntly. “The only reason I saved you is that I saw an opportunity for entertainment. I loathe that blond bitch, but watching you flounder against her and fall into despair… I love it. Between you and Kyosuke, I don’t know who’s despair I love more!” Chisa hugged her shoulders, face red while she licked her lips. “Yes, this has all been my grand puppet show—and my string-pulling made for a magnificent show!”

Why was this so hard to hear? Chiaki accepted that her beloved teacher died long ago. So, she didn’t know why Chisa’s display made her heart tear. Turns out, there was part of her that hoped, despite her twisted methods, the real Chisa tried her best to fight the despair and help defeat the shadow of Junko forever. But now, reality stood across from her. Like always, it was ugly and hard to accept.

“So,” murmured Chiaki, not able to look at Chisa anymore, “it was all lies…”

“Ha-ha, don’t tell me you actually believed all that! I mean, be honest with yourself. The savior, the one who can exploit Junko Enoshima’s fatal flaw, a one-of-a-kind person both Ultimate Hope and Despair can’t match? You’re just a random girl that happened to befriend the right guy at the right time to get another chance at life. Hell, you should thank me and Kamakura. At the very least, being a tool for our interest gave you some meaning in life for a while.”

“But…I thought…” Why is this bothering me? I knew she was a liar the day I woke up from my coma, and she showed her true self. Where along the line…did I start believing her…?

“Don’t be too embarrassed, my dear. I fooled everyone in the Future Foundation. Then again, you had the courtesy of knowing the truth from day one, and you still fell into my web of lies. Guess I’m simply better at this than I give myself credit for.”

Chiaki’s sadness began to form into a rage—a rage unlike she experienced before. Some violent images of Junko committing horrific acts eyes flashed in her head. Only now, they didn’t appall her as they did at first. Without meaning to, Chiaki found herself deep diving into these memories, a smile creeping on her face as she clutched her head.

A familiar mastermind’s in her head chanted, Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!

She shook her head, regaining herself before she fell too far in the abyss. Once her focus came
back, she noticed Chisa eying her with interest. “Looks like you didn’t escape the Neo World Program completely unscathed. I wonder what happened to you in there…”

Chiaki wanted this to end before the game in the Neo World Program concluded or she lost her mind. “Please…we need to warn everyone of Junko’s real plan. You can’t have your fun anymore if she uploads herself to everyone’s brain. If we just go to the Future Foundation—”

“The Future Foundation is dead,” said Chisa, confusing Chiaki. “I’ve allowed the organization to last long enough, and it’s time for the despair I’ve so carefully cultivate to bloom.” The gamer gulped when Chisa pulled out her knife.

“W-What are you planning now?”

“I’d hoped to include you, but I’m going to need you to die here. Sadly, you’re going to miss my glorious final game.” A smile crept across the housekeeper’s face. “You…and Gekkogahara will miss it, that is.”

Chiaki’s froze, Chisa words replaying in her head. Since escaping the Neo World Program, she wondered where Miaya went off to. It was a fact that Chisa not only suspected the therapist, she also had the means to make her “vanish.”

“… What did you do?” murmured Chiaki.

“I cut off some loose ends. Poor Gekkogahara; I didn’t want her to get that wrapped up in our business, but she sealed her fate the day she decided to rehabilitate you. Honestly, Chiaki, you just don’t have a great streak with keeping loved ones alive.”

“Ms. Yukizome…” Chiaki couldn’t tell if her anger rising was her own or another effect of Junko. Chisa might be lying more to rile her up, but the thought of her murdering Miaya gave Chiaki a sinking feeling unlike anything before.

“Oh, are you angry?” taunted Chisa.

Chiaki took a deep breath, glaring daggers at Chisa with her one eye. “Ms. Yukizome get out of the way. I have friends I need to save.”
Chiaki went for VEIL’s touchscreen, but Chisa ran at her so fast—it caught the gamer off-guard. In one quick exchange, Chisa put in the code to release VEIL from her arm before Chiaki pulled herself away. Gasping, Chiaki gazed at Chisa holding VEIL in her grasp before putting it in her coat pocket.

“Did you think I didn’t know the release code for VEIL? You have to try harder than that.”

Oh no! Chiaki broke into a run, wanting nothing more to escape the murderous housekeeper. Since she couldn’t run for the exit, her only chance was to hide somewhere and catch Chisa by surprise. How she could do that is a whole other dilemma.

“Run as fast as you can, Chiaki!” yelled Chisa.

The gamer ignored her teasing, running through the hallways of the facility. Once Chiaki found a room, she slid the door open before closing it. The office was dark, giving her better cover as the gamer hid under a desk, hugging her knees. This gave her an opportunity to catch her breath while she pondered what to do about this situation.

Things started happening so fast, Chiaki never had a chance to recover from her time in the Neo World Program. The gamer felt mentally and physically tired to where she could sleep on the floor if not for the danger. Then she dealt with the odd phenomenon of what Junko did to her at the end. She touched her right eye, the area still afflicted with a burning sensation. When she opened it the first time, the indescribable feeling got much worse.

So, against her better judgment, she used this opportunity of solace to open her right eye.

She wished she hadn’t.

VVV

The background changed, replaced with a busy airport. Hordes of people stood around conversing,
waiting, or getting off their flights. The way she observed this scene was from the eyes of Junko who wore a designer coat and had a smartphone to her ear.

“Hey, I’m just arriving from my flight,” said Junko. “Just checking in to make sure our little prisoner is doing the job appropriately.”

“Yeah, everything is progressing fine,” said the voice of Kitta Takara. “Honestly, Junko, what the hell would you need something like this for?”

“It’s crucial to a little experiment I’m going to hold. Remember, this is all for creating the world we dreamed of.”

“Tch, it better. All the money it cost to get track down this guy and having to deal with the fucking Reserve Course better be worth it. Do you have any clue how hard it is to capture a famous Hope’s Peak alumni without leaving tracks behind?”

“Are you saying you can’t manage this job, Kitta? Even my worthless sister could accomplish that much on her own.”

“No, no… I can do it. It’s just the more time we spend on this, the more we risk someone tracking him down.”

“Just stick to the plan, and I’ll handle the clean up afterward. Trust in my talent; this will all move along smoothly.”

Kitta took a deep breath. “Alright…I kinda wanted to spend my time off in Paris, but whatever.”

“Eh, it’s overrated. Now I gotta take care of some business. Bye, bye!” Junko hung up the phone, laughing to herself. The absolute dependency Kitta had on her now never ceased to amuse her. If anyone could convince an extremely wealthy girl with an ego to rival her own to join the Reserve Course, who else could it be but her?

But that came later. The reason Junko flew to this airport was to kill two birds with one stone. To help set off the Tragedy, Junko flew across the world setting up deals with companies, mercenary groups, cyber terrorists, and various other groups of interest. One group gave her a month to pull off an “extraordinary” incident to prove her prowess in a way they couldn’t miss. Junko used this opportunity to further train her ability to bend and radicalize the human heart.
Junko walked through the airport, her eyes forward. She felt many eyes fall on her; natural, considering her stunning beauty and fame. This airport had such a diverse demographic with all sorts of people visiting this international marvel. The fashionista took notice of how kind everyone acted towards each other, the stares of worship she received, and even gave the occasional autograph to young girls and women who owned some of the magazines she adorned the cover of.

What a friendly place this is, thought Junko. Unusual for an area full of strangers. Junko gazed over at a family of five, the young girl she autographed the picture of happily waving it in front of her parents.

Because of the great reputation of unity this airport had, that motivated Junko to orchestrate some entertainment for her potential partners. So, in a confident strut, Junko put on her shades and walked towards the exit of the airport. This specific exit had six individuals in black standing firm side-by-side. Junko made a quick gesture with her fingers, and the individuals in black pulled out their firearms before marching into the airport.

“Such a sunny day,” said Junko, taking a seat on the bench. She hummed to herself, as the sounds of gunfire and shouts of terror erupted behind her. Junko moved her hands to the sounds of suffering like a maestro to their orchestra. Junko got the point where she could differentiate the meaning of people’s screams. Some screamed in terror, others in pain, some screamed in denial. All of them gave pleasure to the ears regardless.

But, like most things, she grew bored quickly. She’d partaken in this kind of despair so much; it began to get stale. Once my plans begin, I can rekindle that flame I had when I first discovered despair. It has too… Junko stood when her limo arrived. Her boots clanked against the sidewalk until she stopped when a faint squeal came from behind.

“H-help…me…” murmured the bloody body teenage girl from earlier who Junko signed an autograph for. Her eyes were agape, but her voice faint.

Grinning, Junko approached the girl, bending down before clutching her cheeks. “You should be happy. Soon, I’ll liberate the world from the hell that is mundane life. And this event will help us get towards that goal. Didn’t you want to be like me? Face despair with a smile then.”

And then Junko received a stare she loved. The eyes of the girls in disbelief as she discovered the mastermind behind this horrific incident is inches away from her face, a woman whom she previously admired. The despair was great…but still incomplete. Junko pulled away, allowing the girl’s head to hit the ground since the life left her body. She walked to her limo, a grin on her face before laughter erupted.
Chiaki laughed uncontrollably, not conscious of why she laughed but unable to stop it. After she forced her eye closed again, she managed to stifle her laughter before clamping her hand over her mouth. She took deep breaths, regaining her identity as she felt herself return from Junko’s body to hers.

“W-what’s…happening to me…” muttered Chiaki, sweating even though she hadn’t moved for a few minutes. Every time she allowed herself to focus on the images of Junko’s past, she lost herself completely to what Junko felt at the time. The gamer had a headache from the constant shift of emotions it resulted in. One moment the images appealed to her, and the next moment they repulsed her to the point of wanting to throw up.

“Hello!” yelled Chisa so suddenly, Chiaki nearly hit her head on the desk she hid under from the fright. “Now what could you be laughing at in here? Mind if I hear the joke?”

Chiaki kept her hand on her mouth, afraid to breathe as Chisa’s heels hit the floor in the defeating silence. She went from desk to desk, tapping her knife against them. The gamer tried to think of any kind of plan. Both attacking and running didn’t seem like it’d work. But if she stayed where she was, the housekeeper would find her eventually.

“Did I ever tell you my neighborhood loved to play hide and seek asked Chisa. “Whenever we’d play, I’d love to be it. All the kids in the neighborhood would run into the forest, and I’d gleefully chase after them.”

With the landscape of the office, it’s possible she could sneak up behind Chisa and catch her off-guard. The problem laid in how she’d have to do it. The gamer shuttered as the stinging pain of Chisa striking her with a kendo stick because she couldn’t execute the silent stepping technique rang in her mind. And that was in a more controlled setting with the gamer at full health. Now in a dark setting with her teacher trying to kill her, exhausted and mentally afflicted—the difficulty was on expert level.

“All the kids thought the way to catch everyone was just to run faster than the person you’re catching. However, I always managed to catch everyone easily. Now me being the cute little girl I was, no one knew how I could do it.”

Tightening her nerves, Chiaki decided it was now or never. She tried her best to remember every
stealth game she played and crouched while silently walking to Chisa. Thankfully, because she kept talking—discerning her position was easy. That made Chiaki wonder why the housekeeper would do that, but she shrugged it off since reading this woman’s intentions is something she gave up on.

“You see, the trick of catching everyone doesn’t come down to pure athleticism. No…to catch someone, you must know where they’re going to be. And how do you do that?”

Chisa stood ahead. The gamer was close enough now that she could attempt to disarm her. The housekeeper hadn’t noticed yet, meaning the gamer finally pulled it off. With her back open, Chiaki lunged at her.

“By making them think they have the upper hand!” yelled Chisa, quickly turning and swiping at Chiaki.

The gamer barely backed away in time, unable to prevent the knife from cutting her left arm. Chiaki’s breathing grew heavy, her cut bleeding, the wound in the same spot she suffered a cut in her execution. She winced as it stung; if a part of her still thought this attack could be another bluff by Chisa, that was over now.

“You’ve gotten nimbler,” said Chisa, flashing her blade, “but not nimble enough—or perhaps I’ve gotten slower? Oh well…I’ll get you next time, hehe.”

“How can you do all this…?” asked Chiaki, trying to stall. “Your talent is just cleaning, so how is it possible you can be efficient at so many things after falling to despair?”

Chis shrugged. “Who knows? I didn’t know my own worth until the despair helped take the limiters off. I guess I can thank Enoshima for that at least. It allowed me to have all this fun!”

She took a step back, matching a step forward Chisa took. She held on to her arm as she stared into her former teacher’s eyes with terror. The storm was upon her, and Chiaki had no way to protect herself. She kept backing up until she hit a wall. Right when she began to resign herself to death, her fingers wrapped around the comforting metal of an object behind her.

*Ms. Yukizome stands between me and the exit*, thought Chiaki. *With this object, I can…*
“Still thinking you can escape me? What play could you possibly have left?”

“Something you showed me once.” Chiaki ripped the fire extinguisher off the wall before pointing and unloading the contents at Chisa. Then she threw the extinguisher at her before running past the frantic housekeeper, escaping the dark office. She heard Chisa coughing and curing as she distanced herself once again.

*I got lucky; now I must*—Chiaki considered how she could finish that thought. She could run out of the base, but Chisa would follow her while she was in the open. She didn’t consider it up until now, but the housekeeper could very well have extra agents outside stationed as a security blanket. Without VEIL, Chiaki couldn’t offer any resistance to an arrest. It’s not like she could keep hiding forever because the unstoppable force that was her former teacher would trail her to the end of the Earth.

So, what could she do?

Then, the voice played in her head, chanting, *Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!*

Chiaki shook her head, dispelling the violent impulses threatened to erupt. Telling what thoughts came from Junko and what came from her became tough. Junko’s plans for why she used the Neo World Program rang in Chiaki’s head. Gulping, the gamer thought, *Did she infect me with some kind of brain virus? If this continues…will I become Junko…?*

Chiaki’s stomach churned out the horrid thought. However, Junko’s final act before she left would explain what’s happening. She figured Junko’s plan to corrupt her failed after the A.I. saved her life. It appears it could’ve just prolonged it. “Don’t tell me…” she murmured.

Despite the urgency to escape, Chiaki stopped in front of a mirror-like window in the hallway. It terrified her, but the gamer forced her eye open. Her heart skipped a beat, the normal color of her right eye replaced by an almost crimson glow she recognized. And she recognized it because the memories played in her head. The color matched the natural color of Junko. Chiaki shut her eye before she fell too far into the abyss in her mind.

“No…” she whispered, hitting her head against the window. “She…really did implant part of herself in me. So, does that mean…my existence is going to—”
“I’m still here, Chiaki!” yelled Chisa. Her position laid far away based on how the hallways carried her voice, but it snapped Chiaki out of her thoughts.

Letting her legs carry her to a sprint, Chiaki put aside her mental crisis and focused on the problem in front of her. But she couldn’t run away, hide, sneak, or take her on in a frontal attack without VEIL. What options did she have left?

*Simple,* said the voice in her head, unable to tell whether it’s hers or Junko’s. *Just ambush her, take her knife, then cut her throat open. Look into her eyes as she dies, and take revenge, hahaha!*

“Shut up!” exclaimed Chiaki. “I’ll never do something like that!”

Once the voice stopped, Chiaki realized she made it back to the front lobby. After desperately trying to formulate a plan, she noticed the giant door on the far-right side. She remembered Miaya piloting her wheelchair with Chiaki on it through those doors. The magnificent Eden which acted as both a giant habitat for nature and a memorial rested behind the giant doors. And now, Eden might also be Chiaki’s only chance.

Chiaki made a dash for the doors, prying them open before running through the long, dark hallway. She made it into the massively controlled environment. The hum of the lights, sounds of the insects, and spraying of sprinklers bombarded her ears—the perfect cover for a sneak attack. Her silent steps failed in the deafening silence of the office, but the task would go easier in this busier environment. The gamer didn’t want to use this special environment that was the handwork by Daisuke Bandai and meant as a tribute to fallen agents—but Chisa left her little option.

Once she found a comfortable spot to hide, the gamer sat on her heels and awaited the housekeeper. Before, she tricked her into thinking she let her guard down—but the gamer wouldn’t fall for that twice. All she needed to do was disarm her, and that should do it. Still, even waiting became difficult because if Chiaki didn’t consciously pay attention, the darker part of her mind threatened to overtake her again. The balancing act was enough to nauseate her.

Her mental struggle aside, she waited minutes for Chisa to find her location; however, the crazed housekeeper hadn’t made an appearance yet. It couldn’t be that Chisa couldn’t find her because she left the huge doors of Eden wide open. She continued to mull on her confusion before a repugnant scent stung her nose. Once she took a few more sniffs against her nose’s will, the hairs on her neck stood up because she recognized the scent.

“Is that…smoke?”
Chiaki peered from her hiding spot, a terrifying sight before her. Chisa stood in the middle of Eden, throwing lit matches in multiple directions. The carefully crafted bounty of nature began to burn as smoke rose to the ceiling. Despite the hellish background, Chisa spun around like she was in a ballroom. Her laugh made Chiaki treble, the true face of the current Chisa Yukizome too much for her to look at.

“Let the fires dance!” chanted Chisa. “If I want the pests out of the garden, why not just burn the garden down, hahaha!”

“How could she…?” murmured Chiaki, disgusted by the desecration of this beautiful place. Chiaki wished she hadn’t opened her mouth because her throat burned when she did, resulting in a fit of coughing.

“Found you!” yelled Chisa, frightening Chiaki when she pulled a gun out of her coat pocket.

She brought a gun! Chiaki ran around the path opposite from Chisa. Now she just wanted to escape her insane former teacher, and escape this burning paradise before the smoke suffocated her. As she ran, hoping to lose Chisa in the chaos, a strong force hit her shoulder which sent her to the ground. Who else could it have been but the woman so adept at crushing her hope?

“Game over,” said Chisa, pinning her down with a knee to her gut. She put her knife to Chiaki’s throat. “To think, you could’ve been so beautiful had you just follow my orders.”

“I wanted to save my friends,” Chiaki said softly, afraid any sudden movement of her throat would cause the knife to cut her.

“No, you wanted to prove you were actually useful without me shadowing you. But you’re not. Everything you’ve accomplished is because I wanted you to. You rebelled, and look what happened: defeated by Enoshima again, let two of your classmates die, and now at my mercy. You’re so weak.” Chiaki looked away from her. “Aw, did I make you want to cry?”

“You’re wrong.”

“About what?
“Sure, you helped me plenty along the way. But there were many things I accomplished on my own. Recovering after waking from my coma, getting through to Mukuro, resisting you to go help my friends. In a way, I’m happy what you said they were all lies because…it means I did everything by just being me and not your special savior!”

Chisa smirked. “Yes, you’re capable of crossing your I’s and dotting your T’s. If that gives you solace before death, why not take pride in that?” Just as Chisa lifted her knife in the air, prepared to bring it down, her smile faded. “… Why are you keeping your eye closed?”

Chiaki didn’t answer. Then, she gasped when Chisa put her finger over her eye before prying it open. The gamer didn’t get a word in before the abyss started to swallow her again, the will of Junko Enoshima clashing against her own. She tried to fight back, but the stress of the situation made it far easier to fall into the madness.

“Well, what is this…?” murmured Chisa. “Did she leave another mark on you after all? Why...with this, you might—”

Chisa gasped when Chiaki’s hands clamped over her throat. Chiaki smiled ear to ear, laughing as she strangled Chisa. “You like despair right! How about the despair of your brain losing oxygen!”

“Oh my,” said Chisa, red in the face but still smiling. “Seems you can’t control it…” Chisa cried out when Chiaki bit her arm, her blood filling the gamer’s mouth before she snatched her knife away. By the time Chisa looked around, Chiaki vanished in the burning background.

Chisa pulled out her gun. “Playing this game again? Haven’t you realized you’ll never be able to sneak up on me!”

The housekeeper stood her ground, waiting while Chiaki loomed in the background. Sure of herself, Chisa aimed her gun to her side, expecting to catch Chiaki again. But she gasped in shock when she guessed wrong, turning her head to catch Chiaki appearing like a ghost behind her. Chiaki grabbed her arm, kicking her legs from under her and flipping her on her back—disarming the housekeeper. Chisa got to her knees, in time to gaze at the gun pointing at her face. Chiaki stood above her, gun in hand with her right eye closed. The sprinklers finally went off above, dousing the burning Eden and the duo in water.

Chisa’s wore a mystified expression, in disbelief Chiaki bested her. After she hit the ground, her ribbon flew out of her hair. Pushing her long, soggy hair to restore her vision, Chisa asked, “… You gonna do it?”
She certainly committed enough atrocities against her and others that would justify pulling the trigger and ending the nightmarish Despair Chiaki Yukizome. After putting her through over a year of hardship and saying it was all for her entertainment, most would understand Chiaki killing her right here. *She deserves to die,* she thought as she began to pull the trigger. *She killed Miaya.*

Even so, Chiaki managed to regain herself in time for her to pull her finger back and realize the voice saying that didn’t belong to her. Even after everything this woman below her had done, she couldn’t pull the trigger. Instead, she threw the gun in the growing flames before standing in silence.

“… Why?” asked Chisa. “All the unforgivable acts I’ve committed on others and you… You have every right to pull the trigger. No one is here to see you do it.”

“Because…” Against her will, tears fell as she met Chisa’s eyes. “Because I still want to save you…”

Chiaki sobbed as Chisa stayed on her knees eyeing her with a look that seemed sympathetic. Her eyes weren’t unlike how they were before the despair, a gentleness to them. “But what will you do then? The Future Foundation is not a home for you anymore. Despair isn’t a home for you either. What paths do you have left?”

She rubbed her eyes. “… I’m done with doing what you want, what Junko wants, what Kamakura wants, and what the Future Foundation wants… I’m done. I’m going to Jabberwock to save my friends, then I’m leaving all of this for good…”

Chisa giggled. “You actually want to challenge Junko Enoshima again? How are you going to win this time when you’ve failed the previous times? What will you even do if you could? Our class has no future anymore.”

“I’m still going. It’s like you said, I have nothing left to lose—so I’m going to help my friends any way I can. I… just got to do it.”

“Still moving along with despite so little hope, and still no concrete plan. Hehe, but I guess that’s always worked for you. It’s not like I have the right to question it anymore after losing.” Chisa pulled out a little device before pressing the button.
Chiaki flinched when she heard a click, then the choker around her neck popped off, hitting the ground. The gamer rubbed her neck, the texture of her skin under the collar altered from it staying covered for so long. “You took it off?”

“It wasn’t of any use as a tracker anymore. And I lied about it being a bomb; the choker had no use other than a fashion statement.” Then the housekeeper tossed VEIL back to her. “Think of it as a reward for getting past me” Chisa put her hands on her knees, eyes widening. “That’s right… because of the execution, you never had a chance to graduate with us. Well, this isn’t as nice as a traditional ceremony—but considering our time together, this might be more appropriate, hehe.”

Chiaki wiped the wet hair out of her face, the flames dying down and the air becoming more breathable. “You don’t have to do something like that…”

“This will be our final time together, so let me be your teacher one last time.” Chisa cleared her throat. “We come here today to celebrate the graduation of Chiaki Nanami. She wasn’t too receptive at first, opting to stay alone with her games. But soon, she did what she does best and adapted. She used her talent to endear herself to her class, even holding everyone together after my suspension. Being a good friend, a class rep, becoming a capable Future Foundation agent after waking from a coma, and enduring everything she’s gone through—only she could do it. And she did it by being herself, Chiaki Nanami. As your teacher who loves you very much, I send you out into the world! May you carve yourself a beautiful future!”

Chisa finished, putting her hands down and taking a deep breath from raising her voice like that. Chiaki simply stood there, paralyzed by not knowing what to feel.

“A bit impromptu,” said Chisa, “but I think it came out nice. Now go, Chiaki. You’re not under my control any longer.”

Chiaki should’ve left without delay, but instead, she stuck out her hand before she said, “Come with me. The Neo World Program can fix you, and we can beat Junko together. So…please…”

Even after Chisa admitted to tricking her all this time, Chiaki still couldn’t bring herself to give up on her. She didn’t know why.

Chisa smiled before pushing Chiaki’s hand away. “No can do. As I said, I held off for this long. I’ve been carefully building up to one big explosion of despair, and it’s already set in motion. The Neo World Program will do nothing from me.” Chisa put on a serious face. “Now, leave, Chiaki. You’ve graduated, so you make your own future now. That’s a teacher’s wish.”

She still had her reservations, but Chiaki turned her back to her before leaving. Before that though,
she picked up the ribbon that fell off Chisa’s hair. After the smiling face of Chisa beamed at her one more time, she ran as fast she could. She needed to get away from there out of fear her mind would change. Thinking this would be the last time they’d crossed paths should make her happy, but emptiness came to her instead. For better or worse, Chisa shaped her more than anything ever had.

Chiaki ran outside, the sound of a running helicopter around. She feared it meant Chisa called for backup, but she changed her mind once the pilot smiled back at her. The grinning face of Mizuki who broke her out of jail earlier welcomed her. “Boss! I got your call and got over here as soon as possible. Good thing I know how to fly, huh?”

“But, I didn’t…” Chiaki stopped herself, focusing on the urgent matter at hand. “I need you to fly me to Jabberwock, Mizuki. You can drop me off there and escape the moment you do.”

“That’d be hard now, but there’s a bigger problem. The Future Foundation transported some of the Thirteenth Division to a remote location for questioning if they were in league with you, but Despairs ambushed the transport and took them! The Future Foundation refuses to negotiate, so I’m going to rescue them. No way I’m letting more friends die as my brother did! You in?”

Chiaki’s eyes scanned the ground, taken off-guard by this new development. Still, they were in trouble because of their loyalty to her. And if she saved them, that’d more help she’d have on Jabberwock. “Yeah, I’m with you!”

Mizuki smiled. “Hop in!”

Chiaki situated herself in the helicopter before Mizuki took off. She gave one last look at the base she recovered from her coma and spent a lot of time before soaring into the sky.

VVV

After Chisa dialed the number on her phone, she heard it ring once before she Kyosuke’s voice said, “What’s the word, Yukizome? You’re on a call in the conference room with the other division leaders.”

“She’s dead,” said Chisa. She heard some assorted sounds, including the cries of Ryouta. He must’ve felt like he failed again. “Despairs probably got to her. I’ll get her body on a transport soon to verify. I’m heading back now.”
Kyosuke took a moment to answer. “Alright then. Make sure to come back to the main base. We’re all going to patiently await the conclusion to the killing game that’s happening right now. Also, Chiaki Nanami’s name will be stripped from all records and forbidden to say. I never want to hear that name again.”

Kyosuke hung up, making Chisa smile. She sensed the venom in his voice just now. He really did connect with Chiaki more than he wanted to. Chisa was sending a false body, but the Future Foundation wouldn’t be around much longer because of her plans, so it didn’t matter.

Chisa gazed up, the sprinklers starting to stop. “Guess my part in this game is almost over. Nothing more I can do now… It’s out of my control. Did I make the right choices…?” Standing, she faced the way Chiaki left.

“The future is in your hands now, Chiaki.”
Chapter 48: Save the Overcast of Despair

Chiaki walked slowly through Shibuya during sunset. She couldn’t recall the exact details, but this was a scene from somewhere in her past as a young girl. This part of the city, usually busy, was a ghost town. The area lacked any pedestrians, the hum of cars and horns on the street didn’t exist, and a silence ambiance engulfed the area. Chiaki didn’t know why or how this part of the city lacked activity, but the rare sight laid before her.

She kept her hands in her pockets, cradling a new game she just bought, hoodie over her head. In a way, the silence fit her since she never liked the noise anyway. It wasn’t like she had friends to talk to or anything like that. When she got home, she’d do what she always did—lock herself in her room and play a game. So, she kept her eyes on the sidewalk until she got home.

She came up to Shibuya’s scramble crossing, world-famous for holding the title of the world’s busiest intersection. However, for the first time, the entire crossing was empty. Chiaki stood on one side of the crossing, ready to traverse the street and get home. But as the gamer shifted her gaze up, there stood one other individual on the opposite side. It caught her by surprise since the girl across from her seemed to appear from nowhere.

What’s more, the girl across from her gave Chiaki a weird feeling. The girl had crimson hair, and she could feel her scarlet-colored eyes land on her from across the scramble. She wore a uniform and looked Chiaki’s age. Most importantly…the look in her eye. The look in her eyes felt so familiar to Chiaki, like she stared into a mirror, but once again—the gamer didn’t know what it meant.

Regardless, Chiaki began to walk along the crossing, and the girl across from her did the same, both headed for each other.

VVV

The gamer woke up, falling asleep against her will. She intended to stay awake but enduring the physical and mental fatigue of previous events weighed on her. Even with that short nap, her body still didn’t want to move. And the most sustenance she had was the small bottle of water Mizuki gave her.
Trying to ignore her exhaustion, her mind went to the dream she just had. Due to the affliction Junko put on her, she feared sleep. Having nightmares of Junko’s experiences made the natural act of sleeping stressful for her now. But instead, she had a strange dream that felt more like a jump to the past. Chiaki recalled something like that happening. But if that girl across from her is who she thought it was…

Chiaki smacked her cheeks. “No, that can’t be… I’m only tired.”

“With what happened with the Future Foundation and going to jail…” murmured Mizuki. “You must’ve been through so much. Why did Gekkogahara bring you to her base after we rescued you from the cell?”

It’s not like Chiaki didn’t trust Mizuki; she just didn’t feel like going over the myriad of events. “I hid there. So, how many of my division was taken hostage? Is Yuuji or Hina there?”

“Yuuji is somewhere safe, and Hina took refuge with Kirigiri’s division. A lot of the agents taken were mostly rookies that got unlucky. But we’ll save them, I know it.”

Chiaki doubted they were just unlucky. After everything that’s happened, the gamer learned someone always stood behind the curtain, manipulating events behind the scenes. If someone imprisoned her division, then she suspected someone purposely wanted to capture them. Is Ms. Yukizome behind this too? thought Chiaki. “Are we going to have any backup?”

Mizuki looked angry. “Sorry, but after Yuuji found their location, I couldn’t get anyone to assist. Some still think the Thirteenth Division worked with Despairs, others are too busy with other incidents, I even heard some people say they couldn’t spare the resources for such a small cause… The Future Foundation is such a mess right now…”

“I figured…”

“Don’t worry. Worst case scenario, I’ll sacrifice myself to let you escape. I just can’t sit by while my allies are in trouble.” Mizuki gave a thumbs up. “But I’ve got the girl who took down the Despara Carnival on my side.”

Chiaki gave her a reassuring smile, but that level of usefulness was beyond her. She had none of Seiko’s performance enhancers, and she barely had enough energy to stay awake. But she had to push through and save them so she could scramble to Jabberwock and help from the outside.
Mizuki reached for her phone before handing it to Chiaki. “I’ve been keeping an eye on the game. Things are getting pretty serious it looks.”

Chiaki grabbed her phone, observing what looked like the final trial. Her remaining classmates tried to puzzle together the secrets of the Neo World Program, a task Chiaki could’ve done had she not lost. She tightened her grip on the phone, hoping the others could just hold on until she got there. “Also,” said Chiaki, “have you seen Gekkogahara lately…?”

Mizuki shook her head. “She was the first one I went to after I found out what happened to our division. However, she’s been missing ever since we delivered her to you. I was hoping you two would be together.” Mizuki gave her a look of concern. “By the way, why are you keeping your eye closed like that? Did something happen?”

Chiaki narrowed her eye, staring out into the evening sky, the lowering sun giving the world a red tint. “No…nothing at all.”

VVV

Finally, after an hour of struggling with wakefulness, Chiaki exited the helicopter along with Mizuki. They walked to their destination since the helicopter would bring unneeded attention to themselves. After some minutes of walking, the place of her agents’ prison laid before her in the form of a sizable ship docked at an empty port. Chiaki raised an eyebrow since she didn’t see any kind of crew working on the ship.

“… Are you sure this is it?” asked Chiaki, noticing Mizuki’s surprise.

“T’m positive they’re at this exact location. Didn’t think it’d be on a ship of all things, but I’ve given up on understanding how these Despairs work.” Mizuki rose from her position and gestured at Chiaki to follow. “Let’s get this done.”

Chiaki, still having her doubts, said, “Yeah.”

The duo carefully crossed the docks and entered the ship. Chiaki had VEIL at the ready, expecting some guards or any kind of resistance. No such thing happened. Chiaki and Mizuki searched the ship’s confines as they pleased without witnessing a soul. If she were still her naïve self from a year ago, Chiaki would’ve accepted this as a lucky break. Now, she had enough experiences to say
if a hostile situation like this went this well, then somebody intended it that way. But she already came this far and Mizuki would never just up and leave now.

Casting her worries aside, Chiaki and Mizuki continued to search for her captive agents before coming upon the ship’s lower interior. Here lied the brig, and behind the bars were the familiar faces of the Thirteenth Division. They looked dirty and they’re suits were ragged. But once their eyes drifted towards Chiaki and Mizuki, they’re temperaments changed immediately.

They began shouting Chiaki’s name, surprised and happy to see her here. The gamer inquired about what happened to them and why this ship was empty. As for what happened to them, the story lined up with what Mizuki informed her. The higher-ups ordered their transport to a remote location for suspicion of working with Chiaki for the Despair’s benefit, then Despairs ambushed their transport and dragged them to this location for imprisonment. No one could explain how or why it happened to them specially. Also, upon learning the ship had no one on board but them, they all seemed confused, explaining this place was full of them just a few hours ago.

Mizuki clapped her hands before she said, “Let’s focus on getting the hell out of here. Now, where would the keys be to these cells?” Chiaki sighed, despairing at the prospect of finding a pair of keys on this huge ship before she heard Mizuki yell, “Found them!” She swung them on their fingers triumphantly after ripping them from the hook. “Heh, who says Despairs are crafty?”

That sealed it for Chiaki. This wasn’t luck, this was all going as intended. But who could it be this time? Did Chisa decide to play one last trick on her for some reason? Chiaki could barely dwell on it before her now free former subordinates started thanking her for coming, shouting how they always knew her being a Despair was a lie.

“Okay,” said Mizuki, “it’s time to get while the getting’ is good!”

“Hold on…” murmured Chiaki before everyone could take off. “Let’s split into two groups and leave that way. Mizuki, you lead a group, and I’ll lead the other.” Mizuki tilted her head, confused by this suggestion. Chiaki couldn’t give her a good reason why she wanted that… It was a feeling she had.

Despite her persistent glance of wonder, Mizuki said, “…Got it. If you think it’s best, I believe you. Okay, half of you follow me! We’re getting out of here!” Mizuki took off with half the group, giving Chiaki a reassuring glance to wish her luck.

“Let’s go, everyone,” said Chiaki, jogging to the opposite path. As she ran, Chiaki kept on the lookout for any strange transgression, but the ship remained as empty as when they entered. The
gamer started to believe she overthought this. It’s possible the Despairs might be busy with other matters considering how crazy things were right now. Maybe, for once, it’d be smooth sailing—at least until she went back to Jabberwock to assist with the final trial however she could. But, the gamer couldn’t shake the feeling she’d missed something crucial.

Then, Chiaki and the group stumbled when the ship shook, and they heard loud creaking. That could only mean the ship started moving. The horn blowing was the confirmation she needed. And if the ship was moving, that meant there someone else did lie waiting. “Oh no… We need to hurry!”

They took off into a full run, desperate to escape the ship before it drifted too far from the dock. Once Chiaki reached the outside, her heart dropped when she saw the dock a distance away. Her thoughts went to if Mizuki escaped. Her path was shorter so she might’ve, but then her thoughts went to her group. Now, Chiaki became stuck with them.

And that wasn’t all; out of nowhere, several Despairs armed with weapons surrounding them. Since VEIL couldn’t help her now and no one else in her group was armed, Chiaki and the others had no but to surrender themselves. This was a trap… thought Chiaki. But who…?

So, instead of outright killing her, they separated Chiaki from the group—taking her somewhere else. Even in this predicament, Chiaki struggled not to pass out since she still felt exhausted in every way. But now, she had to deal with whatever this was. She kept her consciousness as the Despairs led her to the ship’s bow, the world laid out before her under the reddish sky. They forced her on her knees. Her head bowed. All that went through her mind is who’s behind this one. The only person she could think of was Chisa. Who else could it be at this point?

“You arrived right on time,” said a deep voice that acted like an arrow piercing through Chiaki’s brain. The reason being is she recognized the voice but couldn’t believe she heard it. Slowly, the figure of the man wearing a suit with a helmet of Junko’s face entered her vision, stopping in front of her with his hands behind his back.

“Enigma…?” murmured Chiaki, forgetting about the masked man she spoke with at the Despara Carnival, the man who brutalized Juzo, the man who Junko told Mukuro to follow the orders from, the indidual that gave her a feeling of unease she couldn’t explain. His standing in front of her confused the gamer to the point where she didn’t know what to think.

“Confused?” asked Enigma in his toneless voice. “I imagine you guessed long ago who I really was and accepted that as fact. But you should know by now the simplest answer isn’t always the best one. Truthfully, I had my doubts you’d make it this far. Getting past Kitta was impressive, and you even survived the blindside of sending Mukuro Ikusaba. Remarkably interesting indeed…”
Who…? Chiaki thought to herself. Who in the world was the person standing in front of her? It couldn’t be Izuru because he’s in the Neo World Program, it couldn’t be any of her classmates because they’re there too. Was this just a stranger? That assertion didn’t seem correct either thought.

Enigma chuckled, strange considering he’d only show one emotion up until now. “I can’t imagine how your mind must be racing now. After everything you went through, I must’ve been the last person on your mind.” Enigma stayed silent for a moment like he internally debated himself on something. “Chiaki Nanami, before I reveal the truth to you…I’m curious—who do you think I am?”

How could she answer that? Up until now, the gamer thought she solved the mystery of Enigma. Now, here this mysterious man was again—a person fitting of their name because a million questions surrounded him. Still…Chiaki had an inkling. She didn’t want to acknowledge it, however, and did her best to ignore it.

“Can’t guess? Here’s a hint. Your execution at the hands of Junko Enoshima, the truth about Chisa Yukizome, and the game she’s been playing—I knew about all of that. And the reason I knew about all of it was that I played a vital hand in making it all happen. Do you think you know now?”

Then, Chiaki knew why she couldn’t guess who he was. It’s because she didn’t want to. She knew the truth now… She probably knew the truth since she met this person back at the Despara Carnival. She hadn’t understood what it truly meant to run away from the truth until now. She wanted to run as fast she could away from this because she didn’t want to believe it. But, as everything came together… Chiaki knew who the person in front of her was.

But, instead, she said, “… I-I don’t know,” while still refusing to lift her head.

“Hmm, pity. Here I thought my hint was too easy. Oh well, I can sympathize since you have a lot of things wrong with you right now. After all…”

Then, as Enigma kept speaking and he gently removed his helmet, Chiaki’s gaze drifted upward. Slowly, Enigma’s voice transformed from a deep tone to a light one. As his true face became more visible, Chiaki couldn’t act surprised. She’d already know this was coming. She could deny it all she wanted, but ever since waking, even before that, she knew this meeting had to happen. Enigma’s helmet now fully came off, revealing his true face.
Only, the face didn’t belong to a man.

“… There are many things wrong with me,” said a feminine voice Chiaki knew better than anything. Her long scarlet hair blew in the wind, and her crimson-eyes met Chiaki’s, a grin on her face as she peered down at her. “The correct answer was… I’m Junko Enoshima! How’s life been treating you, nobody? Bet you didn’t—”

“You’re a fake…” murmured Chiaki, cutting her off. The gamer didn’t want to believe any of this was happening, so she chose not to. “You’re… you’re just someone imitating Junko…”

“Harsh. I know I look plain without my makeup on everything, but that was just uncalled for. I mean, seriously, who else do you know could get away with hiding her identity under a mask of her own face, hahaha!”

“No… no, no, no!” yelled Chiaki. “You killed yourself after you lost to Naegi and the others! Your own sister told me you were dead!” Chiaki didn’t even believe her own words. She felt Junko’s will influence her again. It chewed at Chiaki’s psyche to murder the woman in front of her. The thought threatened to consume Chiaki as she tried to resist the urge.

“Now, here’s the thing with that. Make sure to pay attention because this is some groundbreaking stuff I’m about to drop here.” Junko bent down slightly. “It was a lie.” The mastermind broke into more laughter. “Of course my trashy sister told you that. What, did you honestly think you broke her love for me? Listen well, nobody: once I dig my hooks in a person… they never come out unless I want them to.”

Chiaki continued to deny. “You’re a liar. I saw you die with my own eyes… My classmates even took your body apart…”

Junko rolled her eyes. “Gosh, do I have to explain everything? Seriously, this is the dullest part of always being the mastermind. I made two body doubles for myself and Mukuro. Those chumps just took apart the fake body of me; whatever effect it had on them is due to their own insanity. Do you think I’d go to all the trouble of doing that for Mukuro and not myself? The mutual killing game of my formal classmates was never supposed to my magnum opus. I always meant it to be a trial run of sorts.”

“A trial run?” repeated Chiaki, frustrated. “You call killing all the people who trusted and loved you some kind of demo? You’re disgusting…”
Junko snickered. “Glad you’re finally caught up on that. Can’t I just say I’m unique? That’s how the world works now right? Someone could do some fucked up things to people or themselves, but it’s okay because they’re unique. Isn’t it funny how words affect a person’s perception?”

Chiaki hated listening to her, her speech like needles that constantly poked at you, seeking out a soft point. “… If that’s true, then why did you go into hiding as Enigma?”

Junko crossed her arms. “Because, after I witnessed the results of the mutual killing game, my role changed to that of an observer. My plan was to “create” another Junko Enoshima who could mimic my every move and take on my look. The results were, eh, mostly accurate to what I’d do. But, what I really wanted was to see how long the Tragedy could last with Junko Enoshima out of the picture.” Junko put the helmet of herself to her mouth, making her voice deep again. “So, I took on the serious and stoic persona of Enigma, the Observer of Despair. But in actuality…” Junko tossed her helmet overboard into the watery depths below. “I was Junko fuckin’ Enoshima the whole time!”

Chiaki wanted to keep denying the truth, but she couldn’t because it all made sense to her now. Back then when she witnessed Junko’s death, she did not feel happiness. It just didn’t feel right at the time, and even Makoto echoed the same sentiment to her before. And now that Chiaki had Junko’s will inside her, it gave her a new understanding she didn’t have before. Would someone like Junko just end it all for a quick rush after everything she’d done? Chiaki couldn’t hide the crushing dread of realization on her face.

Junko took notice of Chiaki’s despair, naturally. “Heh, finally get it? Sure, the thought of suicide after losing to that twerp Naegi does fill me with a galaxy full of despair… Despair is kinda like a drug, meaning you constantly need something more intense to fulfill that high you got the first time. It’s just how the human brain works. Our “tolerance” constantly demands something more extreme, almost liked we’re wired by nature to be as chaotic as possible.” Junko flicked her hair, her words seeping into Chiaki like a cobra’s venom. “But that’s what separates me from the pack. I’m able to hold off on a short-term high for long-term success.”

“… And Mukuro and your friend Kitta Takara?”

“Pawns. Hey, don’t get pissed at me; go ask the guy who used you too, Izuru Kamakura. When you’re incredibly gifted, you don’t see the world how a below-average person like yourself does.”

Chiaki furrowed her brow. “Don’t compare yourself to Kamakura. He might not be the most compassionate, but he’s shown more empathy than you. You…you’re just insane…”
Junko shrugged before kneeling to Chiaki’s level. The gamer couldn’t believe the form of all her pain was just inches from her own face. Even with her natural look, Chiaki couldn’t deny how alluring aura of Junko. No wonder the world fell for her as a fashionista. The gamer doubted anyone had such an extraordinary presence outside of someone like Sonia.

“If you really want to see the world like me, it’s simple for you now.” Chiaki gasped when Junko put a hand over her closed eye. “Just allow yourself to fall into the abyss!”

The moment Chiaki’s eye opened, the disgusting memories flooded her mind, thousands upon thousands of images penetrating her psyche at once. Then her personality began to blend with Junko’s changing her emotions from happy to sad to joyful to dreadful. Desperate to escape the pain, Chiaki broke from Junko, laying on the ship's floor in a cold sweat, panting before forcing her eye closed. The pieces that made her came together while a searing pain permeating in her head.

“I had the virus make a backdoor into the Neo World Program so I can observe everything the A.I. version of me saw. I thought that after the program allowed you to escape, your transformation into me was canceled… But something even more phenomenal happened. My memories and parts of my personality planted themselves inside your mind while the pieces that made Chiaki Nanami stayed intact. And the result is what you’ve become now… Fascinating.”

“W-What are you saying…?”

“I’m saying that we’re connected, two halves of the same coin… What I’m saying is we now have an unbreakable bond that will be with you until death! Haha, you’re welcome, nobody. It’s the closest thing the greatness you’ll ever experience.” Junko took out some glasses before developing an indecisive look and putting them back. “Hmm, I usually do the personality change thing…but I don’t feel like it now. Ugh, being the boring Enigma might’ve ruined my shtick…”

Chiaki remembered the A.I Junko said something similar, but she didn’t care about that now. She shared a mind with the worst person imaginable, and it’d never go away. Chiaki never acted as the aggressor, but she wanted nothing more than to blow Junko off the ship with VEIL—feeding her to a shark or smashing against raging waves. Sadly, her own exhaustion, the guns pointed at her, and the fact Junko would see it coming stopped that desire.

Chiaki struggled back to her knees. “… I’ve already told Ms. Yukizome. I’m done playing your game. Once my friends beat your A.I, they’ll come to stop you once again. So, if you thought executing me again would help, it won’t. After today, my classmates will never listen to you again…!”
Junko crossed her arms, amused. “How so? Those chumps have doomed themselves to a life of exile thanks to your failure back then. And do you really think Naegi and his band of losers can do anything? Soon, the Future Foundation will burn to the ground. Your dear teacher saw to that a long time ago.”

Chiaki raised her eyebrows, confused at that same vague threat of destruction Chisa echoed earlier. “… What are you two going to do?”

“Me? I’m not doing shit. I don’t have a clue with that psycho housekeeper has planned. You’d probably know better than me.”

Chiaki didn’t know anything right now. Ever since coming out of the Neo World Program, everything turned upside down. Her teacher tried to kill her, and now Junko Enoshima stood in front of her. She didn’t realize it at first, but the gamer noticed that she did, in fact, think of this woman in front of her as the real Junko Enoshima. Strangely, she wasn’t consumed with a strong emotional response, almost like her brain still struggled to compartmentalize how to handle this situation right now.

Chiaki shook her head, struggling to get more words of rebellion out. “I won’t let you, Junko… I’ll stop Ms. Yukizome from destroying the Future Foundation, and I’ll help with the Neo World—”

“Oh my gosh…” groaned Junko. “Man, Yukizome really pumped your head up. There you go again…” Junko cleared her throat before mimicking Chiaki’s voice. “I’m gonna save this! I’m gonna save that! I’ll stop you from doing this!” The mastermind giggled. “What have you saved exactly? Sure, you can stop a random Despair; still, when it comes down to it—you haven’t done anything. Your friends, the Future Foundation, my sister—you didn’t save any of them. If insanity is needlessly repeating the same thing, then stupidity is trying to succeed when failure is guaranteed.” Junko bent down to Chiaki’s level, the two face-to-face. “You can’t stop a damn thing, Chiaki.”

Chiaki stared away, her nails grating against the metal floor. She couldn’t refute what Junko said. However, one ace she still held kept the gamer confident Junko wouldn’t succeed. Grinning, Chiaki said, “Even if I can’t do anything, you’ll still lose. Whether he’s Kamakura or Hinata, he hates you more than anything. Once he gets out of there, he’ll face you, and you can never hope to beat someone as amazing as him.” The gamer hoped that’d result in a mixed reaction from the fashionista.

Instead, she said, “Nope, I’m not worried about him at all. Want to know why?” Junko cuffed her hand to her mouth and shifted her gaze from side to side as if she whispered a secret in a crowded hallway. “I know Izuru Kamakura’s weakness; it’s something even I’m not sure he realizes. The perfect being beloved by talent isn’t so perfect after all.”
“What…?” She had to have been bluffing. Chiaki witnessed Kamakura firsthand and she confirmed that no one could stop him if he took it seriously.

“While the Steering Committee creating him, I watched the project the entire time thanks to some negotiation. Once he was nearly completed, I had my sister murder everyone and contacted him. So, as a result… the Izuru Kamakura project only became ninety-nine-point-five percent complete. Now, you might think that is insignificant, but it makes a world of difference. The thing with perfection is when it gets altered, even just a little—it’s no longer perfect.”

“But…isn’t perfection what you wanted?”

“Absolutely not. See, if he didn’t retain any of his humanity, controlling him would’ve been impossible. So, I decided to leave just a tiny bit of plain, insignificant Hajime Hinata in there to spawn some variables. And it worked perfectly because I played him like a fiddle! You know, in a way, because I did that—it let him recall his feelings for you in his past life which led to him recusing you… You’re welcome.”

Chiaki didn’t know if this was another trick but based on what Chisa explained about the Izuru Kamakura Project—it did explain the “anomalies” in Izuru’s behavior. The gamer still wanted to believe the bond she and Hajime had explained it, but real life usually didn’t have that much romanticism. Nonetheless, a smile escaped Chiaki’s lips once something occurred to her. “Even if that’s true, it gives me validation that the gap between us may not be that big.”

“And why is that?”

Chiaki met her eyes. “Because he chose me over you.”

It might’ve been insignificant, but it still gave the gamer a bit of happiness in this ocean of despair that surrounded her. What’s more, for the first time since she saw the face of the genuine Junko Enoshima, she said a statement that made her smile falter a bit. Even for the fashionista, she had to admit the fact Izuru grew bored with her but still found Chiaki’s actions interesting said something.

A smile returned to Junko’s face before she flicked her natural scarlet hair. “Technically, that game between me and Chisa Yukizome is still active.”

“… Again with this game? What did Ms. Yukizome say to you?”
“When you were still in comatose, she and Kamakura visited my castle where you fought Kitta. It was there… I made a little wager. I’d taken the mantel of Enigma by that point, so it wasn’t like I had anything better to do really. You could say that set the path your life would follow after waking up. I’ll give you kudos when I say I didn’t think you’d make it this far…but I’m glad you did.”

Chiaki pondered what conversation happened between the three. Obviously, it turned out Chisa just did it to build up to an inevitable downfall that would result in the gamer’s despair as she confessed earlier. Still, she wanted to know the details of what they agreed on. And what was Izuru’s part in this? After being kept in the dark for so long, Chiaki wanted all the answers that’d been denied her.

“What exactly is the deal you three made? What’s the actual relationship between you and Ms. Yukizome? Was it all just so you two could enjoy me drowning in despair? And what were Izuru’s true intentions? Why…why are you so interested in me of all people…? If I really am just a nobody and no threat to you…why did you go through all this just to see if I could make it this far…? How…was it possible for you to corrupt people so easily even without the despair brainwashing video…?”

These questions weren’t all she had to ask, but the main ones she wanted to know immediately. From what she knew of Junko, she hated bothersome things. But she stuck with this one thing for almost two years, so there must’ve been some incentive for her. It could’ve been just like Ms. Yukizome, the two so insane that they could find entertainment in toying with her.

As Chiaki anticipated some answers, with a stoic face, Junko said, “Nah, I’m bored of this.”

“What?”

Junko crossed her arms. “I mean, I’m bored of explaining all this. If you can’t figure out the rest… not my problem.” Junko grinned before gesturing towards Chiaki’s closed eye. “Of course, if you want the whole truth…just let yourself be lost into our unbreakable bond. Everything is right before your eye.”

Chiaki sharply turned her head. “Never.”

“Heh, fine. Not my fault you don’t want to see the truth.” Junko put a hand on her hip, sizing Chiaki up as the wind increased in strength. “Now, the question is…what am I going to do with
you now? You made it past my sister and Kitta, but you’ve failed against me every time. However, you’ve managed to weasel out of death on every occasion. Hmm…how should we settle this game? Maybe I should just kill you here and be done with it.”

This was it. Ms. Yukizome wouldn’t pull a trick to help her, Izuru wouldn’t come to her rescue… She was all alone. The armed Despairs around her assured that VEIL wouldn’t be of any help, and even so—the genuine Junko Enoshima stood in front of her, the woman who always stayed a hundred steps ahead of anyone and anything. Junko standing in front of her still hadn’t fully sunk in for the gamer. She always had a feeling, like a distant nightmare that always crept its way into her consciousness. This was, without a doubt, a completely hopeless situation.

However, Chiaki hadn’t folded just yet. For better or worse, she and Junko were connected now. Junko doing all this just for a laugh at Chiaki’s expenses…it didn’t feel right. Somewhere in this insanity lied the truth of this game Junko waged against Chisa. Maybe the crazed housekeeper really did make it all up, but still… Chiaki couldn’t explain it—the true face of her antithesis had yet to show itself. It might’ve been her own naivety since she’d lost numerous times in head-to-head matchups against Junko, but maybe the inner gamer in her refused to back down from one final challenge with her last life.

“No, Junko,” murmured Chiaki, “you aren’t going to kill me.”

“Huh?” Junko raised an eyebrow. “The hell are you on about? You don’t really think you get to choose whether—”

“I mean you can’t kill me…because you still don’t know if you can beat me.” Chiaki looked the mastermind in her unmoving eyes. “Back then at Hope’s Peak, in the Neo World Program, you’ve never once played me one-on-one on a neutral field. I’ve always been the one injected myself into your game, and you always make it so I have no chance of winning. You won’t kill me Junko… because you know you could never be the Ultimate Gamer in a game of her choosing. And that indecision interests you…meaning, you’ll never be able to kill me because you need to know. Ms. Yukizome might’ve been lying, but I think she discovered something by accident. I don’t know how yet, and I still don’t know the truth of everything, but…I can beat you in one last game!”

The gamer took a breath after blurting out her final effort to prolong her life. Junko started back at her; the mastermind’s crimson eyes were still unmoving. Chiaki hoped that could’ve triggered a switch in Junko that’d make her willing to face her one more time, but maybe she just pissed her off into executing her right here and now. Either way, Chiaki meant what she said, and didn’t back down from her gaze.

Then, Junko smiled deviously, before grabbing Chiaki by the hair. After forcing her up, Junko yelled, “Get me a life preserver!” The redhead forced Chiaki to the edge of the ship, raging waters
right below her. After a Despair forced the life preserver around Chiaki, Junko held her over the edge.

Chiaki breathed nervously since she wasn’t the best swimmer and it felt like Junko was about to pull a few hairs out. “What are you—”

“One month, nobody. Regardless of the results of the Neo World Program, I’m going to go all out. No more toying around, no more games—I will kill everyone in the way and put this world in despair forever. In that time, come up with whatever stupid game you want, and we’ll face-off—just the two of us. Hope versus despair, the star vs the nobody, the duel to decide the future, this deathmatch will be the finale of this long game! Once you get everything ready, just let me know. Hehe, I’m sure you’ll find a way to get my attention.”

Junko dug in her pockets and pulled out her Game Girl Ultra. “Wouldn’t want this getting wet. One month, Chiaki Nanami. I sure hope the Ultimate Gamer can make a game worth playing, hahahaha!”

Chiaki grunted as Junko kicked her gut, sending her over the edge of the ship. Chiaki stared into the red eyes of Junko as she fell, the world slowing down. The game knew: this was the beginning of the end. The fate of whether this world would turn towards hope or despair rested on this final game. The future stood between them, and only the victor would decide where it’d go.

The gamer took all her pain and hatred from all this suffering she’d gone through and yelled Junko’s name before falling into the watery depths.

VVV

Once Chiaki finally reached land, drenched and exhausted from everything happening to her, she just laid her back on the sand and stared up at the red sky. What just happened left her in such a state of shock after it was over, her body didn’t know what to do. Junko Enoshima still lived, and Chiaki challenged her to a final game. Chiaki didn’t even feel like that all just happened, like a lucid dream. As if the world herself taunted her, Chiaki turned her head to see Junko’s helmet inches from her face, washed ashore in the perfect position for the gamer to stare into its mocking face. Chiaki sighed before struggling to her feet and walking towards the city nearby.

As she walked, she didn’t have a thought in her head. After what just happened, one might think she’d exude an aura of burning revenge, determination for the final game against Junko, or paralyzing worry over her agents and classmates. But no, she just stumbled along, her eyes empty as they stared ahead. All she wanted in those moments was to find someone to help. She’d even
take Chisa at this point. She just wanted something, anything to make this empty feeling go away.

When she finally reached the empty streets of the city, she saw the flashing lights of a paramedic vehicle. Her mind blurry from all the exhaustion since the Neo World Program, Chiaki weakly said, “Help… Junko is back… Please, help me…”

One of the paramedics spotted her, but something else caught the gamer’s eyes. The paramedics already had someone on a stretcher, the person motionless meaning they likely died. But the following seconds wouldn’t have sent a knife through Chiaki’s heart had she not seen the face. She wished she hadn’t look. When she saw the face, she wished she had died falling off that boat.

The frozen face of Miaya stared back at her, head bent in the wrong direction as her innocent eyes didn’t move.

The final straw that broke her snapped and tears flowed down her face; her eyes stayed glued to her dead friend. The gamer swore her heart stopped working at once as she whispered, “Don’t leave me too… Miaya…” before finally giving in to the exhaustion and pain. She heard someone shout at her.

At this point, the gamer hoped she never woke up again.

VVV

“Hehe, just thinking of how much despair will ensue after my death is the greatest feeling ever,” said Chisa, insane eyes climbing to the chandelier above while all the Future Foundation leaders laid unconscious on the ground. Her game to destroy the Future Foundation had begun, and her death would be the catalyst for the chaos that would happen. She placed all her pieces on the board as best she could. Now, she could finally stop struggling against despair and succumb. And of course, there was Chiaki.

“I did all I could… I made the best use of the time I had left. Now… I can finally…” Chisa reached the top of the chandelier, threw her body up before bringing herself down on the sharp strands of the chandelier. She gasped as pain shot from every part of her body. Yet, a smile crept across her face as she felt the perfect despair right now. This would set off Kyosuke’s despair and destroy the Future Foundation. She wanted nothing more in that.

And then it happened.
“What?” murmured Chisa. She felt her despair fade away as if her brain rewrote itself in her final moments. Her true self burst from the cracks while she began crying, images of her partners of the Future Foundation and mother flowing through her head. She faced her former class as they stared back at her. Then, Kyosuke and Juzo came to mind, her dear friend and the man she loved smiling. Despite the pain, Chisa smiled. “Looks like I got to come back. Even if it’s for a few seconds…I’m happy…I’m so incredibly happy right now…” Finally, a final image stuck in her head, that once lonely girl who loved games standing across from her. She reached out her hand for Chisa to grab. “I give my will and spirit to you now, Chiaki…” Chisa took her hand; the housekeeper felt whole as a bright light enveloping her, and everything washed away in a symphony of warmth as the pain and despair finally disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s the end of this arc. As you might’ve guessed, the final part of this story is next. I had all this planned for a long time, but this really is an all-time low for Chiaki who had a hard time this entire arc and had to go through everything from almost getting killed multiple times to facing Chisa to witnessing Miaya. And of course, the return of Junko Enoshima. How many of you guessed it was her all along? It also pained me to say goodbye to my cunning despair housekeeper (the same with a certain someone who will be incredibly sad) but the story must be told. The final arc of this story will be a big one full of revelations, surprises, twists, and the conclusion to this over three-year epic tale. Thanks for reading!

Anyone that’s been keeping up with this story probably noticed I’ve been updating much more infrequently lately. Due to many events happening in real life—and I don’t mean that negatively because most of it has been incredibly good—I don’t have as much free time to stick to a consistent writing schedule like I could before. However, since I’ve come so far with this story and we’re remarkably close to the finale, I’ll try my best to conclude it sometime in the future—hopefully sometime next year but I’m not sure. So, I’ll keep doing my best in the meantime to work on it, and I apologize for the inconvenience.
Despite the calamitous events Chiaki suffered through—despair didn’t befall her. Instead, she took notice of the surroundings. She laid in bed, wearing her classic attire complete with her bat hoodie. She sat up, gazing around a serene room she didn’t recognize. It’s as if the walls were aflame as the evening sun bathed the room in luminescence. The room didn’t have a speck of dust anywhere, everything organized and maintained—a contrast to the usual mess of electronics and junk food Chiaki’s old room had.

The gamer stepped out of bed, deciding to explore the mysterious house. The rooms and the hallways carried a strange serenity as if Chiaki had lived here all her life. She searched rooms, finding no one else present. She looked out the windows only to see a vast field covered in green grass and flowers. No matter how hard she thought about it, she couldn’t figure out where this was or how she got here.

Finally, Chiaki walked near the front screen door. She heard the creak of a rocking chair swaying back and forth, accompanied by a pleasant hum she recognized. Opening the door, she stepped on the porch.

“You’re finally up,” said the smiling Chisa, her eyes gentle as she knitted. “You’ve been asleep so long, I worried you’d never wake up.” Chisa patted the chair next to her. “Come on, enjoy the nice weather with me.”

Chiaki sat down next to her, hands in her lap as she stared out into the green pastures. She’d spent most of her life in the city, so she couldn’t help but get lost in how the sky consumed the landscape. “Is this a dream?” asked Chiaki.

“Perhaps,” replied Chisa, smiling with her eyes closed.

“What is this place?”

“Whatever you want it to be.”

This wasn’t real. Chiaki had never been here, and she certainly wouldn’t be here with Chisa considering their fight. Even so, being here felt right and familiar. If this was a dream, never had
she been in a dream so real. “How long was I asleep?”

“For a long time. I tried to wake you up, but you never so much as stirred. I worried you were stuck in some nasty nightmare. However, you woke just like I knew you would.” Chisa put aside her knitting and picked a saucer carrying a cup of hot tea. “Did something trouble you enough to make you not want to wake up?”

Chiaki stared at the floor. “Everything… the world is just… so dark. I can’t help my friends, Junko’s back, and you’re…” Chiaki shook her head. “There’s no point in saying. If this is a dream, I’m just talking to myself right now. That or I’m dead. None of this makes a difference…”

Chisa giggled. “There you go again, putting yourself down. Didn’t I teach you better than that?”

“What else can I do? You saw everything that’s happened.”

“Yes, you’re in a bleak situation. Bleaker than what I’m sure most human beings will ever experience.”

Chiaki sat back, crossing her ankles. “I’d rather just stay here with you. This place…it feels so happy here. A haven away from all the despair.”

“Well, that’s an option. I certainly wouldn’t mind the company.” Chisa put her saucer down, placing her hands in her lap. “But, is that what you want? Will that make you happy?”

“Yes…no…I don’t know…”

“Yes, you do know. You don’t belong here. Others need you, right?”

 “… No, there aren’t. You were right all along Ms. Yukizome. Without you…I’m nothing. Everything good that’s happened in my life is because you were there to help. If I don’t have you…I can’t do anything. I’m just an average person who should’ve stuck to her studies as my mom said. The only reason I got so far was because of you.”

“Hmm, so does that mean you’ll stay with me forever? I have no qualms about that.” Chisa gazed
at Chiaki, holding out her hand. “If you want to stay, just take my hand.”

Chiaki reached for Chisa’s hand, sure this was the correct choice. Just as her hand rested mere millimeters from Chisa’s, the gamer stopped like an invisible force grabbed her arm. At first, she wondered what grabbed her. Then she realized nothing held her back except her hesitation. She wanted to stay here with Chisa in peace, but just like every time she’s had a chance to leave it all behind—she couldn’t do it. Closing her eye, Chiaki pulled her hand away, resting it by her side.

“Hehe, I guess that’s that,” said Chisa. “You might think your desire to help others is your burden Chiaki, but inside that will you have to help others despite shortcomings you might have—lies the key to defeating the scourge of humanity, Junko Enoshima.”

“I still don’t think I can… I couldn’t even save you.”

“The fact you won’t give up, tells me you don’t believe that, Chiaki.” Chisa stood, walking to the edge of the porch, staring into the scenic nature. “Spring was always my favorite time of year. All the flowers surviving the harsh winter…finally blooming into their beautiful true selves… You have to go now, right?”

“Yeah, I do.” Chiaki stood, giving one final look to her former teacher before walking down the steps, away from the houses. The breeze sweep across the pain as the flowers danced in its wake. “Goodbye, Ms. Yukizome.”

“May your future be bright, Chiaki. As much as you think I saved you…you saved me more than you could ever imagine…”

With a determined look, Chiaki walked forward. She didn’t falter or look back as the scenery around her dissolved.

VVV

When Chiaki opened her eye, she knew this was reality. In contrast to the serene scenery, she laid in bed surrounded by the white walls of a hospital room. She had returned to zero, this contrasting her awakening from her coma. Unlike then, she didn’t feel any physical pain. Still, the previous events played in her mind, the grim realization of the situation she’s trapped in. She sat up and turned her head to meet a surprising face—a face surprising for more reason than one.
“Hello, Nanami,” said Kyoko smiling, sitting in a wheelchair with a novel in her hand. More noticeably, she wore a hospital gown like Chiaki and had bandages over half her face. “I’m sure you’re perplexed right now.”

Chiaki nodded her head. “… What happened to you?”

“It has to do with everything that happened in the five days you’ve been asleep.”

_Five days…_ thought Chiaki. With all the events happening at once, the gamer couldn’t imagine how it all got resolved. She didn’t know what to ask first. But one thing did stand out in her mind, recalling what Chisa said about the Future Foundation ending. “Ms. Yukizome didn’t do that to you, did she?”

Kyoko looked surprised for a moment before she said, “No, not directly at least.” Kyoko gazed off to the side. “Right, you don’t know about that either… Yukizome committed suicide, Nanami.”

Chiaki just stopped. She stopped breathing, thinking, and listening. She didn’t know whether to cry or not. Now that her backstabbing former teacher was gone, that should’ve been a weight off her shoulders. Hearing she’s gone out loud though… Chiaki didn’t know how to react. “She’s… dead…”

“As I said, a plethora of events happened while you slept.” Kyoko leaned closer to Chiaki, putting on a more serious face. “Given all the truths that have become known, Nanami, I’m going to need you to tell me everything after I get done explaining the past few days to you. Don’t worry, you’re not in any trouble. Right now, I’m your friend that just wants us to be honest. Okay?”

Chiaki didn’t hesitate as she said, “Yes.” The two exchanged smiles. Chiaki recalled when she first met the detective, the tension between them palpable as Kyoko treated her with suspicion. Now the two were close friends, and Chiaki didn’t mind trusting her to know everything that happened in the last couple of years.

Kyoko went first, explained everything in detail as the detective can do. Paraphrasing, the most important things were the killing game of the Future Foundation that resulted in the deaths of most of the leaders, Chairman Tengan’s betrayal, what Ryouto ended up doing, and her classmates awakening to come and save the day before taking the blame for it all and disappearing together. Also, Kyoko mentioned the Thirteenth Division agents trapped on the ship made it out with Mizuki.
When she concluded, Kyoko sat back to give Chiaki a moment to absorb everything. The gamer didn’t know whether to cry in happiness, cry in sadness, get angry, be more confused. In the end, staring at her white bedsheets, all she said was, “Oh…”

Kyoko laughed. “A suitable response.”

Chiaki tightened her palms, the emotion of sadness becoming triumphant. “They’re all dead…all the Future Foundation leaders… If only I said something sooner…”

It sunk in for Chiaki how she’d never get to do wacky chemistry things with Seiko anymore, hear any more of Koichi’s stories, or go training with Gozu. Hell, a part of her would even miss the snobby attitude of Ruruka and the spitefulness of Juzo. They all had their flaws, but none of them deserved the deaths they suffered. It only stung more when Kyoko confirmed Miaya’s body was found dead. There hadn’t been enough time to confirm, but her death was all but confirmed to have happened thanks to Monika Towa.

“Miaya…”

“Yes, in the end, they ended up eating each other alive with their conflicting principles on how the organization should run. The despair videos tipped everything off, but I won’t deny many of us never put aside our desires for the good of the organization. Thankfully, your friends saved the day and deflected blame onto themselves. Because of that, public morale rose and the final push we needed to stop the Despairs happened. Now, things are returning to normalcy at a rapid rate.”

“Hinata…” said Chiaki, wiping aside her tears of sadness to grin.

“Be glad, Nanami. They did everything to honor your memory. Inside the Neo World Program and the rescue of the Future Foundation, they found the will to do it because you connected with them all. I’ve never been one to put too much stock in that sort of thing like Naegi, but even I have to admit what you did for them made a lasting impact and led to the end of despair. I’d like to think even Munakata reflected on that, wherever he is.”

“And…how many people know I’m alive?”

“A few in my division, and the agents you’ve helped rescue. We’ve all kept silent until you were able to awaken and give your side of the story. Thankfully, you woke up; it looked uncertain whether you’d wake at one point.”
“Yeah…” murmured Chiaki, remembering her dream, if that’s what it was. Then, the gamer took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll go now.”

Chiaki explained everything from as far back as Hope’s Peak Academy. She described her meeting with Junko, Chisa’s brainwashing, her execution, and all the events that happened in the background while she worked for the Future Foundation. When the gamer concluded, she took deep breaths since that all was a mouthful. Saying everything that happened to her put into perspective how normal the insanity became. The only thing she kept to herself for the moment was Enigma’s identity.

Meanwhile, Kyoko sat back with her legs crossed, staring into space. “And you knew nothing of Mitarai or the chairman?”

“Ms. Yukizome mentioned something weird about the chairman once, but I never had any concrete feeling something happened. I never knew Mitarai had anything like that planned.” Kyoko hummed, still thinking. “I’m so sorry, Kirigiri. Even if it meant I’d die, I should’ve told you sooner.”

“The old me would agree… But, given what you went through, and how terrifying it must’ve been dealing with Chisa daily with the threat of death—it’s unfair me to say you should’ve sucked it up. It was a failure on my part too; I approached you too harshly and didn’t give the impression I’d help if you said the truth.” Kyoko pinched her nose. “I can hear my father saying, ‘I told you so’ right now.”

“Even so, if I spoke up, they could’ve lived.”

“No, now that I know everything, I wouldn’t be so certain. Considering the unique nature of Chisa Yukizome and the clout she had within the organization, I doubt either of us could’ve done anything substantial to stop her. As a detective, one thing I had to come to terms with is how something as definitive as the truth won’t solve every case…” Kyoko leaned closer to the gamer, staring at her concealed eye. “And you say…you’ve absorbed the essence of Junko Enoshima?”

Chiaki put a hand over her cursed eye. “I couldn’t tell you how she did it or how this is even possible. But every time I open it and sometimes when I dream… I feel like I lose my identity and start to become her… When I was data, a part of her must’ve copied onto me, I think…”

“I see…” Kyoko let out a heavy sigh before giving Chiaki a sympathetic expression. “I must
confess, even after our mission to investigate Kitta Takara… a part of me still doubted you. While I always suspected Yukizome, a part of me wouldn’t let go of my suspicion of you.”

“I mean, you weren’t wrong.”

“No, I was. I considered you just as guilty as her. I failed to look behind my conjecture and consider how I knew you as a person. One of my biggest shortcomings was always failing to consider the humanity of every situation…” Kyoko put her hand on Chiaki’s bed, her gloves off revealing their scars. “Something I still haven’t grown out of it seems… I consider this all a failure on my part, just like you do.”

Chiaki narrowed her gaze before smiling, taking Kyoko’s hand in her own. “Guess we’re both just too stubborn, huh?” she said which drew a laugh from Kyoko.

“You might be correct about that.”

Chiaki’s smile faded, gulping as she still had one last thing to tell. “There’s something else… Enigma revealed himself to me.” Kyoko’s eyes stayed on Chiaki as if they became glued in place. “It’s Junko, Kirigiri… Enigma’s identity is Junko Enoshima…”

Kyoko gasped, shock plastered on her face in a way Chiaki never saw from the composed detective. Of course, learning the woman who put you in a killing game and murdered your father couldn’t be easy to accept. “Nanami… do you know what you’re saying…? Are you certain it wasn’t a trick played by your mind or a fake… perhaps even—”

“I saw her… I spoke to her. When Murkuro took me, she denied Junko being alive every time I asked. But I always knew deep down… Yeah, looking back, I think a part of me always knew. Search your heart, Kirigiri. Would Junko Enoshima let herself die like that while assuring her sister’s survival? Could someone that’s done all she did, really let herself lose like that…?”

Chiaki watched as Kyoko went through all the stages of grief, the truth slowly dawning on the detective. Chiaki imagined this is what she was like when Junko revealed herself. Kyoko sat back, staring off while her mind moved a million miles an hour. After a minute of pure silence, she finally closed her eyes and said, “I take it she used a body double?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure of the details, but the mutual killing game and the Tragedy was just an experiment for her to see how long it could all last if she didn’t live.”
Kyoko balled her fists when Chiaki uttered the word “experiment,” no doubt angry at the carefree attitude the blond had towards her unforgivable acts. “So, how did you get away then?”

“… A game. I challenged her to one final game, only this time it’s a game of my choosing. She agreed and gave me a month to come up with something. Then, we’ll face off one-on-one.”

“Goodness, it’s like a Greek epic… You don’t intend to follow through, right? It’d be more prudent to lure her out, then capture her for the last time. If you want, we’ll devise a plan. Togami can have the Future Foundation ready in—”

“No,” interrupted Chiaki, looking down, “I’m doing it alone. I meant everything I said to her…”

“Nanami…” Kyoko crossed her arms. “I know you might still fear help from the Future Foundation, but it’s okay now. Yukizome is gone and the organization is reformed. You have my promise you won’t be arrested, and your name will be cleared. Junko Enoshima is the world’s problem, so let us help you.”

“You don’t understand; it has to be this way. This won’t work if it’s not me, and me alone. Maybe I have finally gone insane, maybe Ms. Yukizome did fill my head with too many lies, maybe it’s Junko’s will twisting my heart and wanting nothing but revenge.” Chiaki furrowed her brow. “This will only work if I do it!”

Kyoko stared back at her, flabbergasted. “Why…? Why in the world would you do something so foolish?” Then the detective developed an angry look of her own. “After everything you went through and the sacrifice your friends made to ensure our survival, why would you throw it all always on such a thing!”

“I can’t explain it in fancy detail like someone as talented as you. It’s just…after learning about her, meeting her…having a piece of her with me—I don’t know what it is exactly, but I know there’s something there.”

“You’re not the savior, Nanami; I don’t mean that disparagingly. A title like that only serves as a burden. Since I’ve been working with Naegi, I’ve seen what it can bring. In a way, Yukizome fabricating it all should be a relief to you. Whatever responsibility you thought you had was absolved. Not facing Junko doesn’t make you a failure… It’s better to have a full life than a foolish death.”
Chiaki gawked somberly out of the window, the skies clearer than they’ve been in a long time. “I’m sorry, but I have to. My friends, they found their answer and saved a world that will never welcome then again for no other reason than it was the right thing. Now, I have to do the same.” Chiaki put a hand over her eye, an ugly truth about her condition beginning to dawn. “Besides… I’m on borrowed time anyway thanks to Junko’s will.”

“Nanami…” murmured Kyoko, melancholic eyes. “You don’t mean…”

“I hoped it’d go away, but now I know it’ll keep spreading. Eventually, I’ll probably become just like Ms. Yukizome—stuck in a limbo of despair until I fully lose myself. Maybe I have a few months…probably less than that. I’m going to atone for my failures when the time comes, and I’ll join Ms. Yukizome wherever she went.” Despite herself, Chiaki smiled reassuringly. “Until then, honor my dying wish, and let this typical gamer play one final time.”

Kyoko maintained her sad demeanor, silence resuming. The gamer wished she didn’t have to put the detective in this position. After all the death and betrayal of the past few days, now she had to accept her friend’s willingness to face off against Junko Enoshima before her inevitable demise. Chiaki didn’t know why she wasn’t as upset. Maybe so much has happened that her emotions just began to numb to maintain her remaining sanity.

“And what of your classmates? I assumed you’d want to find them upon learning of what happened.”

Chiaki reveled at the thought for a moment before turning away. “My place isn’t with them anymore. They reached their conclusion and found their answer. I don’t have too much longer anyway, so it’s better they think I’m still dead and not have to suffer through me losing my mind… This is the only thing left I can do.”

“… This is just like the final trial all over again,” said Kyoko. “A desperate situation that despite all my reasoning, I can’t think of a solution. Yet, Naegi’s words were enough to usurp that, leading me to a conclusion I couldn’t bring about with all the logic I had…” Kyoko breathed out before giving Chiaki a wry smile. “If that’s your wish, Nanami, I’ll honor it.”

“Thank you.” Chiaki took a breath of relief, ironic considering she just got permission to face Junko which is the opposite of relief. “If you can, keep what I’m doing quite for now. No one must
interfere at all.”

“I can have that arranged for the time being. Technically, you’re under my protection now.” Kyoko’s patent cynical expression appeared. “Let me ask you: Do you know exactly what you’ll do? Do you know what kind of game you’ll challenge her too, where it’ll be, or even how you’ll set it up?” Chiaki blushed with embarrassment as Kyoko sighed. “As I suspected…”

Things moved so fast, Chiaki never thought about any of the finer details. She could think of a million things she’d seen in games, but putting them into practice wouldn’t be easy. It’s not like she could wage the fate of the world on a game of tic-tact-toe with Junko Enoshima herself. And even then, Chiaki doubted she’d win. Nonetheless, thinking about what game to do couldn’t be done until the gamer finds out why she gets to Junko.

It all went back to the truth about who Junko Enoshima is. But what could it be? Despite Chisa admitting it was all a lie, maybe Junko did have some exploitable flaw. Why else would Izuru consider Chiaki the only one to face Junko? Then again, Izuru did say she’d lose. Chiaki rubbed her head, frustrated. *I have no clue how to proceed…*

Then Junko’s words rang in her ear about the truth being right before her eye. Just the thought of jumping into that abyss of despair terrified Chiaki too much to consider.

“If I may,” said Kyoko, noticing Chiaki’s inner struggle. “After the fallout of the Future Foundation killing game, Chisa’s room and offices were raided. We did end up finding some incriminating evidence; however, an interesting object was found.” Kyoko gestured to the small table next to Chiaki’s bed. On it rested a white card.

Interested, Chiaki picked up the card. She flipped it over, a few words written in the impeccable handwriting of Chisa. “If you want a solution, return to the flowers of tribute,” said Chiaki speaking the words out loud.

“I’ve gone over it a thousand times and never deciphered it. You were close with her, so I’d hope you’d shed some light on its meaning.”

This confused Chiaki. The words themselves weren’t confusing since Chiaki understood what this mysterious message said in seconds. The housekeeper mentioned it a few times, and it stuck with the gamer because of how it reminded her she shouldn’t be alive. Rather, what confused Chiaki is why Chisa would bother writing her this. *Why would she bother with this if…?*
“Chiaki?” said Kyoko. “Do you have an idea about what it means?”

“… Yeah, I do.” Chiaki removed the covers, revealing her scarred legs, her skin pale. She moved her legs around, her muscles nice and spry. “I thought they’d be all tight after not moving for days.”

“Hina would come in here every day and massage your legs so they’d stay loose.”

Chiaki smiled, wishing she could see the swimmer before she left. “I’m going to need some clothes and some money for a cab ride. Maybe extra for some snacks and stuff. If this is the last time I see you…thanks for everything, Kyoko.”

Kyoko’s eyes widened. “Slow down for a minute. What did the letter mean? Where are you going…?”

Chiaki paused before she said, “Somewhere I never thought I’d go again…”

VVV

Getting out of the hospital required some compromise on Chiaki’s part. In the end, she agreed to contact Kyoko daily and give her a status report on what she did that day. Afterward, Kyoko handed Chiaki back her belongings—discretely escorting her from the hospital before handing her some money. When asked, Chiaki told Kyoko to tell those who know she’s alive she had a particularly important task to handle. They’d probably think she’s selfish for running off after everything that’s happened, but Chiaki had enough of a problem.

Chiaki sat in the back, leaning against the cool window of the cab, adorned in her Future Foundation uniform with V.E.I.L by her side. Since all her belongings and money were put under hold for now by the Future Foundation after the truth came out, Chiaki only had the clothes on her back. Wearing her uniform gave Chiaki a bitter sense of nostalgia since she technically wasn’t a Future Foundation agent anymore. The gamer didn’t know what to call herself at this point other than a person foolishly resisting fate.

And then her thoughts went to her friends. Sitting in this car gave her mind time to catch up on everything Kyoko told her and that’s the first thing she thought about. What were they doing now? Kyoko said they seemed happy and at peace with themselves. Chiaki never wanted anything more than that. Granted, she wanted to be by their side too. But her failures assured that dream would
stay just that, a dream. Luckily, Makoto and the others helped when they did and gave them a chance to win against the false Junko.

Then the other side of the spectrum, an immense sorrow for her former division leaders. While Chiaki didn’t get as close to them as her classmates, thanks to the bizarre circumstances of her employment courtesy of Chisa, she still mourned. Her heart even went out to Kyosuke who must deal with the fact both his friends were dead and who Chisa Yukizome was. Chiaki would miss them; if she could, she’d go back in time and die in their place if it meant stopping Chisa’s sinister plans.

Chiaki hadn’t even had proper time to mourn Miaya. How hard the therapist must’ve taken it as she saw the organization fall apart. She’d always remember the gentle eyes of Miaya she woke up to. In retrospect, the therapist saved her life back then. Chiaki furrowed her brow while the name Monica Towa quietly left her lips. She knew of her nefarious deeds now; even though she was young, the gamer didn’t know what she’d do if Miaya’s killer stood across from her.

While Chiaki did her absolute best, she couldn’t stop herself from thinking of Chisa. How should she feel? The housekeeper helped destroy the Future Foundation leaders and made her life a living hell. Chiaki should revel in her death, hoping that if hell did exist—the housekeeper would get a first-class ticket.

So why? The gamer thought over and over. Even with the essence of Junko always whispering in her ear to hate and resent, the gamer couldn’t bring herself to hate the housekeeper. With everything that’s happened, she didn’t have the energy to hate. The only thing she focused on was Junko Enoshima.

“How long…?” she murmured, touching her closed eye. Admittedly, the gamer overstated how fast her mind degraded to convince Kyoko to let her go—but it wasn’t a lie. Chiaki knew, eventually, her mind would succumb. There wouldn’t be any extra lives this time. Physical injuries were one thing, but this problem would never vanish. Her former teacher became living proof of that.

However, this didn’t put Chiaki in despair. With the world recovering, and Despair almost gone—only Junko Enoshima remained. Of course, that wasn’t to understate the problem since it’s a colossal one. But with her gone, everything would be over for good. No other person on the planet could replicate what she’s done. It all counted on Chiaki finding an answer where she was going.

Just what did you have planned…Ms. Yukizome? thought Chiaki. If what she thought she’d find turned out correct, what Chisa did utterly perplexed her. The gamer felt like an idiot for even doing what she said after everything. Regardless, the gamer had no moves left and whenever she didn’t, Chisa always gave her one at the last second. She’d just have to count on the fact Chisa might...
unintentionally give her something helpful.

“We’ve reached your stop…” said the driver, an older man. “Are you sure this is where you wanted to go? I mean…this place…”

“No, it’s exactly where I want to be,” said Chiaki, paying her fare before stepping out of the cab. “Thank you very much.”

The driver still looked hesitant. “Just watch yourself. I don’t know if you heard, but this place has some ominous stories behind it.”

Chiaki smiled. “I’ve heard a thing or two.”

With that, the driver tipped his hat and drove away, leaving Chiaki alone. A nice breeze came through, Chiaki closing her eye and taking it all in. Despite everything, this filled her with nostalgia. She walked to the spot she did all those years ago, right in the middle of the giant insignia, and stared up at the place she loathed upon first visiting. She imagined Chisa laughing at how she’d do this in a place where Chiaki never wanted to see again.

At one time, this place was a symbol of her despair.

And now, she suspected, it’d be her final hope.

“I’m back,” said Chiaki, a stoic expression, “Hope’s Peak Academy.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s been awhile everyone; I hope you’re all doing well. Due to more free time now and a new laptop that works, I’ve been able to write a bit here and there again. The updates will still be somewhat inconsistent, but I’ll still try to get to the finish line. Also, from here on out since this is the final arc, I’ll stop the skits since I want this serious tone to continue. Maybe I’ll do some after the finale, but it remains to be seen. Thanks for reading!
While the campus of Hope’s Peak Academy stood abandoned after its downfall, Chiaki’s memories filled it with life as if she could see the ghosts of the past walking around. She strolled through, taking in all the past experiences she recalled so accurately. Nearly every square inch had some story behind it involving her vivacious class. Since the responsibility of the class fell on Chiaki after Chisa’s expulsion, the gamer found herself acting more mature than she ever did to keep them all in line. Chiaki laughed to herself, certain she couldn’t do that again if she tried.

The gamer lost count of how many times her class almost got caught in a Nagito-like situation where they’d go a little too over the top with their antics. Like the time Kazuichi almost made a rampaging robot with weapons, or Ibuki held a concert on exam day, and a weird series of events led to Sonia almost being in Fuyuhiko’s gang because of her enchantment with old mafia movies… But, mostly, things were tame.

Most of what her class did was hang out somewhere, go on trips, or relax around campus—the impeccable photography of Mahiru capturing all those events in a catalog that’s been lost. While Chiaki did take on the responsibilities of Chisa, Mahiru pretty much took up the “team mom” role, and Fuyuhiko sort of became her enforcer if others wouldn’t fall in line. Mahiru and Fuyuhiko always went on saying how Chiaki helped them move past the deaths of Sato and Natsumi, but Chiaki—never one to like taking all the credit—always thought they moved past whatever that situation was on their own.

While she wanted to focus on the warmer times of being a Hope’s Peak alumni, the tragedy that was Hope’s Peak Academy made that impossible. Chiaki gazed over across the campus where the Reserve Course once stood, the ugly reminder of how talent and the lack thereof can corrupt others. Once she learned what it was, Chiaki hated starting at the building. She’d always tell any Reserve Course student she met it didn’t matter if they have talent. Sadly, the venomous words of Junko Enoshima usurped anything Chiaki could have said.

And thinking of the Reserve Course led her back to a certain spot.

“Heh,” giggled Chiaki, “it’s still here.”

Chiaki sat on the bench she and Hajime usually hung out every day, but the fountain behind her dried up long ago. Even so, she sensed the ambiance in this spot she did those years ago. Looking back, Chiaki wished she would’ve pushed harder. Maybe she could’ve invited Hajime to see her class in secret. The gamer still recalled the empty look in his eyes, like the one she used to have. Still, with everything bad that’s happened, Chiaki took solace in knowing everyone was alive and happy.
Then, Chiaki gasped when something came to mind. “If Hinata still has his memories…then does he know I’m still alive…?” She didn’t know the specifics of what he remembered and didn’t. Did he know the things Izuru did? If he did know, then Hajime should be aware that Chiaki lived after her execution.

Chiaki shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. The others…did what they needed to do. I can’t look back now…”

The gamer stood, taking a deep breath before continuing her way. This walk down memory lane eased her soul a bit, but she kept in mind why she came here. If she interpreted the letter correctly, then her destination should be in another place she spent a lot of time.

She walked into the remains of the main building, the infrastructure damaged after everything this school went through. Struggling not to get herself lost in memories again, good and bad, she made her way through the hallways. After some turns, she ascended the stairs and walked until she reached the room.

“I can’t believe…it’s still here…”

Chiaki took in the sight of her old classroom. The evening sun flooded the room in light since the wall had been blown off. She spotted some scorched papers lying behind Chisa’s desk. Chiaki picked them up, eyes widening when she realized these were the burnt remains of Mahiru’s photos. Her fingers slid across the burnt surfaces as she tried to make them out as best as she could. She hardly recognized them anymore, but no question these were her class photos. Putting the photos aside, her eyes drifted towards her goal.

And sure enough, there on her old desk rested a small glass vase holding flowers. The sight took her breath away. The surroundings around her were burnt, destroyed, and ugly. Yet, here the flowers stood, still alive and untouched like a magical barrier protected it. Somebody must’ve been taking care of them this entire time—perhaps Izuru or one of her classmates. Regardless, Chiaki approached them holding her breath in anticipation.

Then, Chiaki put a hand over her chest in shock as below the flowers a letter rested—just as she thought.

“It’s here…” Chiaki gulped, carefully removing the flowers that acted as her grave before holding the letter in her hand. Along with the letter, she found a small bronze key. She took another deep
breath before opening the contents, reading the letter out loud.

“At the time of writing this, we just had our duel. I’m assuming that I have died, you’ve discovered Junko Enoshima is alive, and you made the choice to stand against her once again. I’m sure you’re confused as to my motives for writing this considering everything that’s happened. I don’t expect you to forgive me for everything I’ve done, so it’s your choice of what you want to do. If you think this is a trick, you can walk away and stop reading.”

Chiaki looked away for a moment, narrowed eye starting at the ground before resuming.

“However, if not, then follow my directions. Using all the resources I had from the Future Foundation’s database, witness testimonies, belongings we found in her castle, and my deductive reasoning—I’ve compiled a collection of information to piece together the dubious past of Junko Enoshima. That key is for the library door; inside is all the information I compiled. Don’t be afraid of the truth.”

After the initial reading, Chiaki read the letter five more times. She checked the back, but that was it. Without question, Chisa wrote this for Chiaki. This confirmed the housekeeper knew about Junko the entire time. That didn’t surprise Chiaki as much as Chisa’s actions to research the mastermind.

*Did she plan to take Junko down or herself?* thought Chiaki. The gamer skimmed the letter again. *No, this was meant for me. But why…?* The gamer thought back to her last confrontation with the housekeeper, no doubt in her mind Chisa tried to kill her. Maybe in her final hours, she reconsidered? Chiaki grunted, frustrated. She put aside Chisa for now since she already had her hands full understating one insane women. Right now, she just wanted to check the authenticity of this information.

Chiaki headed towards the school’s library. Chisa never specifically said which library she hid the information, but she couldn’t think of any others. Thankfully, the library stood in one piece, the dust coating the room causing Chiaki to sneeze. She switched the lights on, revealing the messy library, books strewn across the floor. Chiaki shuffled her way through the mess before arriving at the door at the back of the library.

Chiaki didn’t visit here often during her school days, a bad habit she got scolded for often. But she knew this room housed important books donated to Hope’s Peak Academy. In the mutual killing game of the seventy-eight class, Junko filled this section of the library with tops secrets texts and government documents. These were all confiscated by the Future Foundation as soon as the game ended. Chiaki stood in puzzlement as to what Chisa could’ve put in here now.
Chiaki tried to open the door only to find out it was locked. She used the bronze key, and just as she thought—the door opened after a click. In contrast to the messy front, this room looked neat and organized. Books and documents were neatly stacked on the shelves, the room lacked any dust—a clean and well-organized area that told Chiaki someone neat and orderly visited here recently.

The gamer observed the room, picking a random folder off a shelf. She gasped upon opening the cream-colored folder. Inside contained old photos; they varied in location and what people were in them—but a constant always remained Junko. Some had her original look while others had the new one she made to become a fashionista. Either way, this folder unquestionably contained photos of Junko’s past. Next to every photo was a sticky note written by Chisa, mostly giving an estimate of the location and date the photo was taken along with some description of the event taking place.

This room had much more information such as a mountain of documents containing full, unredacted transcripts of Despairs and partners of Junko. The gamer found videos of interviews she’s done, all the magazines she was featured on, and travel records of everywhere she went. Even things like some old books Junko read, diaries, and school papers were all there. And Chiaki found all these in just a few minutes. What else is there in the ninety-nine percent of things untouched?

“It’s all here…” murmured Chiaki, turning and gazing at everything in disbelief. Of course, it occurred to her this all could be fake—one last prank by Chisa on her part. But as Chiaki looked into Junko’s childhood pictures, staring into her dead eyes… These photos couldn’t be anything other than real.

“… Okay,” Chiaki said to herself. “I don’t know what it is you wanted, Ms. Yukizome, but I have to just move forward now and do it.” Then Chiaki took another look around and felt a heavy weight on her shoulders upon realizing something. She suddenly got flashbacks from her study sessions and the busywork. It was a good thing Junko gave her a month because she’d need every day.

“Where do I even start…?” Chiaki sighed. “I’m going to need those snacks…”

VVV

Kyoko sat in her bed, already on her fifth novel since she entered the hospital a few days ago. Her quick thinking during the Future Foundation killing game saved her life, but her body was far from healthy. It wasn’t anything life-threatening, but she’d need to stay off her feet for a while. While in the hospital, the detective would break out her laptop and do any work she could before her friends or doctor forced her to stop. Her father always said not to work herself to death, and Kyoko came close a few times.
It’s not something she’d ever say out loud, but the insanity of the Tragedy did somewhat motivate her to greater lengths. A sad thing about a detective is they’re the janitors that clean up villainy and untruths. Junko Enoshima made sure there wouldn’t be any shortage of that for years. Now with things calming down, she feared her skills would dull. Then again, given what Chiaki told her yesterday, who knows what the future will hold?

Upon think of her friend, Kyoko gazed at her phone. She talked to Chiaki first thing this morning. The gamer, never a morning person from what Kyoko understood, sounded hyperactive as if she’d been injected with sugar. She went on about how she’d been up all night reading more than she ever did. Kyoko asked her to slow down and explain slowly, but she’d already hung up.

Kyoko still occasionally thinks she shouldn’t have let Chiaki go. She could only imagine all the emotions running through her head after finding out about everything, and now her mind would erode under some mysterious influence of Junko. For reasons such as that, she wondered if Chiaki was even in her right mind to make decisions. Against her better judgment, Kyoko put faith in her as she did on their mission together. In contrast to when they first met, Chiaki seemed determined of her own free will to do what she needed.

Her stomach turned when she thought of Junko still living. Kyoko struggled not to tell everyone the truth and lead a full last assault against the mastermind. However, if what Chiaki said was true, she didn’t think that’d make a difference. She felt frustrated, wondering if this is how detectives in the books react when meeting their ideological foils. It tore her up inside, but she didn’t know exactly how to confront Junko. As much as she sought revenge against her father’s killer, she acknowledged that only Nanami always got close to her for whatever reason.

Just as Kyoko thought on it more, her eyes widened when she heard someone yell, “Kirigiri!” The detective sighed, dreading this moment she knew would have to come.

“Kirigiri!” yelled Aoi, at the door and out of breath with a furrowed brow. Lagging behind her was Makoto, hands on his knees.

“S-sorry…Kirigiri…” he said, panting. “I…tried to… hold her back…”

“What’s this I hear about Nanami leaving and you letting her!” yelled Aoi.

Kyoko rubbed her forehead, wondering who and how Aoi interrogated that out of one of the agents. “You don’t under, Asahina. Nanami chose to leave.”
Aoi pumped her fists. “Still, after everything that’s happened, she shouldn’t be out there alone! She should be here with friends!”

“Did she think she’s in trouble?” asked Makoto.

“No, I explained everything that happened. Even knowing the truth about Chisa Yukizome came out and her friends are alive and well, Nanami felt like her responsibilities lied elsewhere.”

Makoto had a worried look. “I can’t imagine all the emotions she must’ve felt learning everything. And even then, she still felt the need to go back out there…”

Aoi got closer to Kyoko, eyes like steel. “You know how I feel about this kind of thing. I couldn’t help her when she was abducted or when Yukizome framed her in front of everyone. I…I don’t want anyone else to die…! She told you didn’t she, where she’d go? There’s no way you would have let her if she didn’t. What did Nanami tell you…? Please, Kirigiri…”

Kirigiri averted her gaze. She made an honest effort not to hide too many things from her friends anymore, but she didn’t want to betray Chiaki. “…Asahina, I can’t tell you everything. You must understand that Nanami isn’t doing anything she doesn’t want. No one is forcing her to do anything anymore. Everything she’s doing is of her own free will for the first time in years. It’s for that reason I let her go with the understanding I might not see her ever again…”

“So that’s it…” said Aoi, eyes tearing up. “I don’t get to see her again…to say sorry for not helping all those times she needed me…? How can you make me accept that after everything that’s happened? Why can’t you just—”

“Hina…” murmured Makoto, drawing Aoi’s eye before he gestured to Kyoko. The detective tried to hide it, but she knew her face looked less than composed now. “She’s worried too…”

Aoi breathed in and out a few times. “Sorry, Kirigiri”

“Kirigiri isn’t the type to do things without a good reason,” said Makoto. “And I don’t think Nanami is either. I can’t imagine what she’s feeling or what’s she out to do. We must hope she’s found peace in whatever it is she decided to do. I’m sure she wanted to see you as much as you want to see her.”
Aoi paused for a minute. “Yeah…you’re right, Naegi. Always count on the Ultimate Hope to make things better.” The swimmer hopped in place before shouting. “Alright, I’m better now!”

Kyoko smiled, impressed by how fast Aoi bounced back. “I can tell you the truth in due time. Honestly, I’m still debating on what I should do.”

“Well, maybe this wasn’t a good time then,” said Makoto. “I came here to pitch you an idea but if you’re too busy…”

Kyoko waved her hand, always willing to hear what Makoto had to say. “What is it?”

“The thing is…” murmured Makoto, eyes darting from left to right with a nervous grin. That told Kyoko this must’ve been serious. “Now that everything is settling down, I got to thinking… Don’t react too strongly because like I said, it’s just a thought I had but—”

Aoi groaned before she said, “He wants to make a new Hope’s Peak Academy.” The swimmer put a hand on her hip. “Sorry, Naegi, but it would’ve been midnight by the time you got to the point.”

Naegi scratched his chin. “Hehe…always having back, Hina…”

Meanwhile, Kyoko sat in bed, unsure of how to respond. For anyone else, she would’ve considered this some ridiculous rambling or a joke. But she knew Makoto and knew him well enough to know he believed in this idea. She knew the lucky student held strong enough in his principles to not only considered this idea but take the steps into making this insane vision a reality. Still, the practicality of this idea is something even Kyoko couldn’t work out.

“Close the door, Asahina,” said Kyoko, closing her laptop. After the swimmer did as instructed, Kyoko started Naegi directly in his eye. “Who else have you told about this?”

“I pitched the idea to Togami yesterday, but I ended up coming up with the idea with my sister.”

“And how did they react?”

“Well, my sister seemed enthusiastic—so much so, that she wanted to help set things up herself.
Togami…his reaction was kind of like yours at first…”

Kyoko raised an eyebrow. “At first?”

“He shunned the idea at first, saying something like that was a foolishly naïve goal. But, when I explain what I wanted the new Hope’s Peak Academy to represent, he started to soften up on the idea. In the end, he said his connections could get some backers to help fund the new project if you got on board. I was pretty shocked actually…”

A grin threatened to escape from Kyoko, Byakuya now a complete contrast from the persona of the uptight affluent progeny he used to embrace. “He has changed…”

Makoto nodded. “He’s come a long way from obstructing murders for his enjoyment at the very least.”

“Regardless,” said Kyoko, putting on a serious face, “you do realize how bad the optics are with this, Naegi? Our school isn’t the famous pinnacle of talent it used to be. Its name is forever synonymous with Junko Enoshima and the collapse of society. It has become the most infamous place on Earth, and you honestly think people will go for that? The media will eat us alive, and that’s not even counting actions the government might take. Even if you are Ultimate Hope, it won’t help you.”

“I thought the same thing,” said Aoi before Makoto could get another word in. “That place… there’s awful stuff that happened there. It’s taken a long time…but now I realize that a lot of good happened there too. At one time, we had fun every day as a class without a care in the world. I’m not as smart as you, Kirigiri, but I think if we can make a place like that again without all the horrible crap—it’s worth a shot.”

The detective let silence consume the room before she said, “I understand where you’re coming from, but you have to look at the reality of things. Personally…I loathed the school the moment I stepped into it. The fact Enoshima used us, what happened with our classmates, my father…” A lump in her throat appeared for a moment. “That school was a mistake. Making a place where your worth is determined by a random trait called talent could never work…”

Makoto and Aoi both looked disappointed, but those were Kyoko’s true feelings. While she did miss those warmer times at school, the despair that place carried with it now could never vanish from her mind.
“… Is that true, Kirigiri?” asked Makoto with a resolute gaze, drawing a raised eyebrow from the detective. “I know it’s easy to say you regret it all in retrospect, but can you say that you’d rather Hope’s Peak Academy never happened?”

Kyoko closed her eyes, getting what Makoto meant. “I’m not saying I regret meeting you all, Naegi. However, if us not meeting could’ve prevented this all—”

“No, you can’t look at it that way. What happened to us was a tragedy, but now that everything is over—we need to turn all the despair of the last few years into a new beacon of hope. Just imagine a Hope’s Peak Academy without something discriminatory like the Reserve Course, or the Steering Committee, or Junko Enoshima. Nanami said something that stuck with me: talent should not define who you are. The new Hope’s Peak Academy should become a place where everybody comes to find their true purpose, not just a place where talented people are rounded up while those without pays the bills.”

Makoto stared at the ceiling. “I always have this image in my head. Things turned out so bad for all of us…but what if it didn’t? Our class, Nanami’s class, the Future Foundation leaders—we are all different except for one thing we all have in common…Hope’s Peak Academy. I always imagine all of us, taking a huge group photo in front of the school as alumni. Kirigiri…I want to give future generations something that was stolen from us. I want to be there one day…and stare into the faces of those I helped show it’s okay to believe in hope before they go out into the world!”

Kyoko sat back, not frustrated but amused. Twice in two days, she had Chiaki and Makoto preach their foolish ideas to her that the old Kyoko never would’ve gone for. Still, even with all her logic and deductive reasoning they lacked, she couldn’t refute either one them. Kyoko laughed at herself, thinking these times of peace really were dulling her detective skills. That, or maybe she slowly started becoming like the gamer and lucky student.

“Honestly,” said Kyoko, smiling, “how do you expect me to turn you down after that showing?”

Makoto rubbed the back of his head. “Sorry…guess I got a little carried away. So, does this mean you want to try?”

“… On one condition. I don’t want some committee or investors to decide the direction of the school. I’ll agree to help with establishing a new Hope’s Peak Academy only…if you become Headmaster.

Makoto gasped before Aoi shrieked in delight before she said, “Oh wow, I thought the same thing! A bunch of boring suits will complicate things, but if it’s Naegi deciding things—no way it could
Makoto frantically swung his hands back in forth. “W-woah, hold it a minute! I don’t know anything about running a school!”

“Then I suggest you started researching,” said Kyoko, opening her laptop before typing rapidly. “I’ll research and send you numerous books to help you get started, you’ll also have to meet several of Togami’s contacts in person, then you’ll need to decide things like the location and design choices. We’ll also need to set up a media day, and you’ll also need to personally meet people and start networking on your own to get some benefactors. That’ll be a good start I presume.”

“U-uh…” murmured Makoto, his face nervous.

Kyoko grinned, amused Makoto thought there wouldn’t at least be this much worked involved. The lucky student probably thought he’d pitch the idea and it’d all work out.

“Hey, Hina?” said Makoto, turning towards the swimmer with a hopeful grin. “Think you could help with…”

Makoto stopped when he saw Asahina at the door, waving enthusiastically. “Good luck, Headmaster Naegi! I got a box of glazed donuts with my name on it!” Aoi used her athleticism to sprint out of the room faster than during the Future Foundation killing game.

“Looks like you’re on your own.”

“Great…” Makoto sat near Kyoko’s bed, hands on his knees. “I was also thinking of tracking down Munakata. He’s way more qualified for something like this than all of us. Building a new and better Hope’s Peak Academy might the best thing for him to move on after all he went through.”

“I have my doubts. He views Hope’s Peak Academy as his greatest failure and sees you as something he couldn’t be, even with all his talents. The former vice-chairman made it clear he wanted to find meaning on his own. I don’t think getting involved in something like this would interest him.”

“Yeah…you’re right.” Makoto had a far-off look, his mind a hundred miles away for a moment. “I
know Nanami told you to keep it secret, but could you at least tell me if she’d be interested in helping after she gets done doing what she needs? I think she’d be lots of help.”

Kyoko looked away. “I have no idea. Even I don’t completely understand Nanami’s motivations at this point. But…I don’t think she’d want any part of it either.”

“…What happened in the Future Foundation was our mess, and her classmates bailed us out. Not to mention how they saved the day back in the Neo World Program. We couldn’t help them, so when I heard Nanami was alive—I thought that’d be our chance.” Makoto stared at the ground. “I just wish…we could’ve done more for her…”

“I do as well…” Kyoko didn’t know if Chiaki would succeed, fail, die, or go mad. Still, she doubted the gamer would ever come back to them. She made her final goodbye sound more optimistic than it was, but Chiaki knew she probably wouldn’t return. “I might even miss those absurd rumors about our relationship went around.”

“Oh yeah…” Makoto bobbed from side to side in his chair like he mulled something over. Finally, he said, “So…about that…Was anything of that for real or…?”

“No, we were just friends,” Kyoko said faster than she meant to.

“Ah, okay…just wondering.” The duo shared a smile before Makoto looked somber. “I just hope Nanami can find what she’s looking for…”

Kyoko nodded. “Nanami is strong; she’ll be fine…” Sadly, Kyoko didn’t know if she believed the latter part of that.

VVV

A week passed since Chiaki returned to Hope’s Peak Academy to begin her research, and she wanted to die even faster than she already was. She’d spent day and night in the library, reading everything she got her hands on. Her only breaks were for sleep, the bathroom, or food. She didn’t even have her faithful Game Girl since Junko stole it. It might’ve been Junko’s influence, but she felt herself going mad reviewing everything while her crucial answer hadn’t been solved yet.

That isn’t to say she hadn’t figured out anything of interest, however.
Junko Enoshima was born in a small town, minutes apart from her twin sister, Murkuro. Their father worked at a convenience store and their mother became a stay at home mom to take care of them. Their living conditions were rough; police reports of disturbances often came from their household, the source their parents getting into loud and sometimes physical arguments.

Outside of the house, Junko’s grades were stellar. She never failed a test, got a question wrong, and stayed out of any trouble. In elementary school, Junko came to meet Yasuke Matsuda—the boy who’d grow up to become the Ultimate Neurologist. Since his research became vital for Junko’s endgame, Chisa hypothesized in her notes that their meeting might not have been by chance. She further went on to say that Junko might’ve had more to do with Yasuke’s eventual delve into the medical field than expected.

Beyond this, Junko was a loner. While nobody hated her, many people admired her acumen, Junko never hung out with anyone and rarely spoke much. An incident caused Junko to see a counselor, much like Chiaki did with Miaya. Strangely, her counselor went missing one day until her body was discovered—her death ruled a suicide. This tied to a string of suicides that arose around the town at the time. Chisa speculated that not only was Junko discovering her love for despair at this time, but she might’ve also played a part in the suicides. Though, no evidence of this ever appeared.

Her parents died in a house fire, the cause ruled to an electrical failure instead of arson like Chisa suspected it was. Junko and Murkuro ran away to parts unknown for a while. Then, out of nowhere, Junko appeared as her famous strawberry blond persona before starring on television. Her popularity exploded after this, achieving fame unheard of for someone her age. Her fame only grew as she aged, starring in movies, television dramas, and other things. What really made Junko famous is her work as a fashionista and a stunning understanding of marketing. Her magazines, advertising deals, and clothing line made her the world’s youngest billionaire.

In the shadows, however, Junko made deals with several different organizations and people of interest. She met Kitta Takara during this time, her sister Murkuro started her feared reign as the Reaper in Fenrir, and thousands of other groups that admitted or were suspected of aiding her. The airport massacre Chiaki had visions of might have been an initiation of sorts for Junko to gain the trust of one of the world’s biggest organized crime syndicates. But, because of Junko’s genius—her connections to these groups never rose to light until the Future Foundation interrogated these groups years later.

Chisa even made a timeline of Junko’s stay Hope’s Peak Academy. It went into depth about what she did with the seventy-eight class, some theories on her behind the scenes work with the Steering Committee and Ryota. She even met with her eventual supposed heir, Monica Towa. It even cataloged some weird event involving an alternate persona she made to test the neurological findings of Yasuke. Junko’s supposed bond with Yasuke intrigued Chiaki since she couldn’t imagine the blond genuinely loving anyone. Again, however, nothing here gave her any new
insight about the mastermind.

Beyond this, most of the information contained smaller details about Junko from her favorite foods to which brand of cereal she liked best. Even with this wealth of information about the fashionista, Chiaki still didn’t get that long-awaited moment. She waited for a line of text to make her eyes light up as everything became clear. Alas, that moment of enlightenment continued to elude her. She’d almost seen everything Chisa complied, but the rest seemed like more trivia that wouldn’t do her much good.

Chiaki sighed. “Where is the answer…?” The gamer stood, stretching her numb legs. She rested her eye for a moment, standing in the quiet space alone with her thoughts.

“Having trouble?” said a voice that made Chiaki’s eye burst open. The library around her changed into a dark void. In front of her laid a dark portal of twisting shadows, the silhouette of Junko Enoshima standing inside. “Just give in; it’s so much easier.”

And then the familiar dissonance came as Chiaki felt herself slipping away. She grabbed her head, trying her best to shake it off.

“What’s the point of shaking it off?” said Junko in an eerily toneless voice. “We’ll be one soon enough—”

“No…never!” yelled Chiaki, who ran backward before tripping over an invisible object. She winced in pain before opening her eyes, the normal surroundings of the library restored. The gamer ran into a pile of books, her form in the mess of texts and documents she caused. Hugging her knees after sitting up, she took a deep breath. Dealing with Junko’s will was like knowing someone followed behind her, but it would vanish every time she turned around. It snuck up quietly, taking anything it could before being forced to withdraw. Soon, she wouldn’t have anything left.

I’m like a game whose data was corrupted. Ms. Yukizome, how did you deal with this…? Despite the bad blood between them, this affliction gave Chiaki a weird admiration for the deceased housekeeper. How she could be so efficient while dealing with something like this for years is something Chiaki couldn’t comprehend. The gamer stood, refocusing on the dilemma she had.

“All this information helps, but it still isn’t making me understand Junko. Her actions are one thing, but unless I could know what she thought and felt, how can I—”
Chiaki stopped when something caught her eye. She picked up a sketchbook by her feet that stuck out like a sore thumb among all the books. She flipped through the pages, finding only two drawings inside the whole thing. The first was a crayon drawing of a girl with her eyes downcast that meant to resemble Chiaki. On this page, a note by Chisa read how she found it in Junko’s castle.

While this mystified Chiaki as to why Junko drew her, the drawing on the next page made her heart skip a beat.

“This picture…” murmured Chiaki.

This picture, also drawn by crayon, depicted two girls on opposite sides of the page with buildings in the background. The girl on the left had scarlet hair, and the girl on the right had cream-colored hair. The picture portrayed two girls standing on opposite sides of a city street, staring at one another. The moment her vision hit this page, a memory entered her mind.

And that’s when Chiaki began to realize.

“This…this is the dream I had!” Chiaki recalled her dream on Mizuki’s helicopter ride. The images she saw matched this picture perfectly. The implications of this scared Chiaki because if this is what she dreamt of, then that event happened. And if the two girls staring at each other is who she thought they were… Chiaki took a step back, gathering herself before observing the picture again. Confirming the feeling she had, a note by Chisa had “this seems important” written on it and nothing else.

“This is it… Whatever happened on that day is what my answer is…” Finally, that moment of clarity hit Chiaki. She couldn’t explain it, but this picture was crucial. Except, Chiaki couldn’t remember the context of this at all. If the two girls in this picture were herself and Junko, then Chiaki possessed no recollection of what happened.

Chiaki closed her eye hard, trying with everything she had to remember. She paced around, ate some things to replenish her strength, she even kept trying to go to sleep to trigger the dream again. After spending the whole day trying, the gamer didn’t succeed in remembering.

*It’s no use*, she thought, on the verge of tears from being so frustrated with herself. *I’ve remembered thousands of tips, strategies, and experiences from video games… so why can’t my stupid talent help me remember this picture!*
Chiaki calmed herself down before she got too angry. Then she thought about any method to pry this memory from her brain until something came to her. She rubbed her closed eye, acknowledging that her brain didn’t contain just her memories anymore…

She gulped, beginning to realize what might need to happen. Junko’s words about the truth being right before her eye came back to her as well as Chisa telling her not to fear the truth. Still, the thought of willing letting herself succumb to whatever is lurking in the dark corners of Junko’s mind filled the gamer with paralyzing fright. Who knows what awaited in that endless abyss of despair?

But Chiaki realized her situation. Her game against Junko was three weeks away, she had no plan, no answer to what Junko is, and she couldn’t remember an important moment in her past.

She didn’t want to; however, she thought back to her classmates who selflessly rescued the Future Foundation despite the implication. Hajime and the others had the strength to do what they needed in her honor. Now it was her turn. With that in mind, she nodded to herself and left the library.

Chiaki didn’t know if what she wanted would still be in the school, but she headed towards a certain infamous area. After some turns and an extremely uncomfortable ride in an elevator, her eyes landed on the trial room. The gamer hated this room. It’s where Junko would harvest all the despair she planted previously and make her beloved execution. It also looked like where she nearly died. Despite the discomfort, she pressed forward.

She placed her hand on the stand, straight across from the chair Monokuma would sit. *This is as good a place as any*, thought Chiaki. She steeled her nerves, preparing for what she would endure. In a way, she was grateful for those despair video exposure sessions. A mind not used to resisting despair would’ve crumbled.

“I don’t know how long I can hold it, but even so… Junko, let me into the abyss!”

Chiaki opened both of her eyes.

Across from her stood Junko, smirking while standing behind the trial stand. Her presence made her feel real, so much so that Chiaki had to keep reminding herself that the blond was an illusion.

“There you are…”

“You sure you want to do this, nobody?” said Junko mockingly. “Once Pandora’s box opens, you
might not be able to close it.”

“Yes. I’m going to use Ms. Yukizome’s information and your memories to piece together the truth—right here and now before the final boss battle.”

“You dweeb…” Junko closed her eyes before landing a piercing azure gaze on Chiaki. “Hope you don’t regret it!”

An influx of emotions hit Chiaki as she grabbed her head. Pain, happiness, hope, despair—everything began hitting her at once. Then the world around her changed as parts her separated. She nearly panicked from this existential crisis, but she held on—determined to see it all through this time.

*Show me…the truth!*

**VVV**

The young Junko with her natural scarlet hair stood on the edge of a bridge, the wind fierce. This bridge had a nasty history behind it in her town, a central site for people to leave this cruel world forever of their own will. Junko came here daily, standing on the edge like this while deciding if today was the day. After her eyes, devoid of any emotions, stared down for an hour—she sighed and walked away.

“I get to live another day,” she murmured, headed home under the red evening sky. “How stupid…”

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!